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of suspense by
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FEBRUARY-274

MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE HARMLESS KILLER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

In life she had been cruel, demanding. Now he was dead, horribly so, and his sightless eyes asked for vengeance. Mike Shayne nodded. Ruthless foes had waited for their chance and struck. It was his turn . . .

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THE HARMLESS KILLER



A NEW, COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

One black night they had given Mike Shayne to solve the riddle of the widow who knew too much—and the lure of the whispering Death...

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**



THEY FOUND the old man down on the floor, on the deep piled oriental rug in the library where he loved to spend his afternoons. His face was contorted out of all recognition by the physical and mental agony which had torn and rent his last moments.

He was dead.

He was an immensely rich old man, and his servants found him in death. They called the

family and his own personal physician.

After that they called, not the police, but the coroner himself, as beffited the death of a man of such very great wealth and importance. The coroner came in person, which was contrary to his usual practice, and he brought the police because that was a part of his job.

The old man had fought for

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his life. He had used the gold handled letter opener from the library desk to cut a long slash in the left trouser leg all the way up to the knee. With the point of that same letter opener he had slashed an X across each of the twin punctures in the swollen and purple calf of that same left leg.

From the amount of blood on his trousers and his hands he had done his best to get Death out of his body.

The poison had been too fast for him though. He hadn't even had time to call for aid before it struck him down with a terrible, fiery paralysis of the nerves which meant sure death when it reached to lungs, heart and brain.

The coroner said: "Snake-bite. But how ever did it get in here."

Chief of Police Will Gentry said: "We'll have to search the house for it before it kills somebody else."

The junior detective from the Homicide Division said: "Oh My God," and went into the lavatory in the hall and was very sick into the bowl.

An hour later, back at his Miami headquarters, Will Gentry was talking to his good friend Michael Shayne.

"You don't want me," Shayne said emphatically. "You want that guy who runs the

Serpentarium down U.S. 1. Or if you can't get him, how about one of the zoo keepers from out on Crandon Park?"

The big private detective was sitting in the one leather upholstered armchair in Will Gentry's office. The Miami Chief of Police was back of his desk pouring brandy from a bottle of his very private stock.

The third man in the room was their mutual friend Tim Rourke, ace feature writer for the *Miami News* and man-about-town in the South Florida Gold Coast area.

"We already had the man from the Serpentarium," Chief Gentry said. "That's why we want you, Mike."

"I don't get it," Shayne said. "All I know about snakes is I hate their guts. He's the expert on the filthy things."

"Sure," Gentry said. "But we don't need a snake expert right now. What we do need is a detective, and that's you unless you've switched jobs lately."

He handed the big private eye a tumbler with a good three fingers of brandy.

"I still don't get it," Shayne said and drank some of the fine liquor. "Also I still don't like snakes. What's the matter, Will? You got detectives coming out of the walls around here. Use one of your own boys."

"I can't do that, Mike. The

corpse was Seymour Wilding. He was so big around here he made the ordinary V.I.P. look like a peanut vendor. Even dead there's enough clout back of that name to make trouble all over the place. I can't send in regular cops to that sort of set-up without a warrant and I have no way to get one."

"On the other hand," Tim Rourke said, "the family wants a real investigation of the death. They want it made right. Expense is no object. But at the same time it has to be very hush-hush indeed."

"That's where you come in, Mike," Gentry said.

Shayne finished his brandy. "What would I be supposed to be investigating?"

Both men hesitated. Then Rourke spoke up again. "It might be murder, Mike."

Mike Shayne was visibly jolted. "Murder? By a lousy snake?"

"That's just it," Chief Gentry said. "We don't know about that snake bite. Not for sure we don't. We had the snake man look at the body and he found something he shouldn't have."

"Oh come off it, Will."

"No, I mean it, Mike. You know how a snake's fangs hinge back into its mouth. When it hits something the fangs should hook in at a sort of slant, at



LUCY HAMILTON

least on anything bigger than the snake's own mouth. Wilding was bitten in the calf of the leg, but the fang punctures don't hook in on a slant. They go straight in."

"So what?" Shayne asked. "Our snake expert won't swear it was a snake bite. He won't swear it wasn't either. We can't issue a warrant on a 'maybe' that thin. Besides the manner of death all points to a snake poison, Cobra type in fact."

"Still the family isn't satis-

fied," Tim Rourke said. "They want to know if it was a snake or wasn't. No snake's been found in the house or grounds yet. If it wasn't a snake they want to know who or what it could have been."

"They're willing to spend the money to find out—and you can bet they can afford it. They know me from way back, so they sent me to put the pressure on Will here to do something. We all know he can't move without the warrant. So . . ."

"So you call me in," Shayne said. "No good, boys. I simply don't like snakes."

"It'll be twice your regular rates plus expenses," Tim Rourke said.

"No. Hire somebody else. This town's full of private operators who'd jump at the job."

"They aren't Mike Shayne," Chief Gentry said.

"If it should turn out to be a human-type snake," Tim Rourke said. "If it is murder, and you can turn up the killer and legal proof of what happened, there's a bonus of twenty-five thousand dollars that I'm authorized to promise you."

"That sounds better."

Tim Rourke had a final clincher. "You know the widow, Mike. When you knew her she went by the name of Karen Steele."

"I'll take the job," Mike Shayne said.

II

"YOU HAVEN'T changed, Mike," Karen Wilding said. "You're still the same man I used to know."

"I've changed," Mike Shayne told her. "It's been all of ten years, and with a man my age that counts. You've changed some too, Karen, but in a different way. You don't look a day older, simply more beautiful. I can guess you get your clothes in Paris now."

"I can afford it," she laughed in response. "I use a different hairdresser now too. Different than when I used to dance in the old One-Eighty-Club."

"I wasn't going to mention that," the big detective said.

"Oh," she said, "everybody knows. They don't dare quite to come out and taunt me with it, but even the servants and the delivery people know. They can't forget, but they'd better not forget that I married Seymour Wilding either. I'm his wife—was his wife I mean—and his widow. An old friend like you I'll let forget that, Mike, but not these wolves around me here."

Karen Wilding was a beautiful woman, luxuriously dressed, dark haired and dark eyed and with a figure to make even the blasé girl-watchers of Miami Beach turn their heads in spite of themselves. The diamond ring on her left hand was a flawless six carats to Shayne's practiced eye and the simple daytime dress with the Paris label must have cost a thousand dollars at the least.

Here in the second floor sitting room of the big old Renaissance type stone mansion looking out over Biscayne Bay from the Morningside section of Miami she was a magnificent sight to the eyes of any man.

"Suppose you tell me why I'm here," Mike Shayne said and tried hard to keep his look impersonal. "Start at the beginning and don't leave out a thing. You know you can trust me, and I can't help unless I have all the facts."

"Of course," she said.

"Then let's have it. Why do you think you need me? Who are the wolves you mentioned just now? What's wrong with the coroner's verdict of snake-bite, Karen?"

"I don't know what's wrong. But I know something is. That's why I wanted you on this case, Mike. To find out for me. That is before I get killed too."

"That's a hunch, Karen," he said. "What I need is facts. Like they say on the teevy; the facts ma'am."

"Don't make jokes with me, buster," she said. "This isn't funny. If you'd seen the awful look on him on the floor down there you'd know how not funny it is."

"They said a snake—and there were those holes in his leg. The symptoms were snake poison stuff, the coroner said, like a cobra had hit him. But where is the snake? Nobody found any snake and the police and that creepy snake man went all over the place. No snake. Besides cobras aren't American."

"This is South Florida," Shayne said. "A few miles out in the Glades there are more poison snakes to the acre than any place in the world. I know. I've been there. They say some of them are cobras that escaped or were turned loose and bred too. I wouldn't know, but that's what I hear. As to finding one in a house and grounds this big, I just don't know. Snakes get in the walls, between floors. There could be a hundred of them here."

"Sure," she said. "Oh, sure. A hundred snakes with big enough mouths so their fangs go in the wrong way. A hundred snakes waiting to creep

in and bite one of the world's ten richest men. Oh, sure."

"It wouldn't take a hundred," Shayne said, "one would do."

"That's right, Mike. Only one. Only one human snake to put poison in my husband someway. Stick him with an ice pick or something with a sharp point and poison him. You know it could be done. You have to see that, don't you?"

"Yes it could be done," he said. "Somebody could get a snake and turn it loose in here when he knew your husband would come in. Or he could get a vial of poison and a sharp tool like you said. That leaves a couple of questions. But a couple of real big questions. Who and why?"

"I can give you the answers," she said. "I can tell you who could have done it and why. You got to prove it to me and to the cops. That's what I'll pay you for. Anything you ask, Mike. I pay you to prove who did it and how it was done."

"I suppose the why... is money," Shayne said. "With all the money Wilding had that would be it?"

"It would."

"Then that leaves who?"

"I said I could give you that," she said. "The who is easy. Elsie is who. You can see that, can't you?"

"Elsie?" Shayne asked. "That would be his first wife, wouldn't it? The one he divorced to marry you. Why would she do it. For money? Revenge, maybe?"

"It's not the way you think," she assured him. "Elsie has plenty to gain in money in spite of the fact she's the divorced wife. You haven't seen the will. Nobody has so far but the attorneys and the family."

"On Seymour's death Elsie gets fifty million dollars in her own name. Hers for good, Mike. Then she gets another fifty million, or the income from it, to be held till her death. Then it goes to their son."

"Son?" Shayne asked.

"Yeah, Charlie. He's only fifteen now. He lives here part of the time and with her part of the time."

"I didn't know."

"Not many do. Charlie's a screwy kid. He doesn't go for publicity. A bookworm. Any way, that's the way it is. You see with Seymour dead she gets a hundred million bucks. Believe me, that's enough government lettuce to make a snake out of most women."

"How about you?"

"Me? I don't know. Oh... I see what you mean. I do all right too in the will, if that's what you want to know. I get fifty million free and clear like dear

Elsie. Then I get life interest in the balance of the estate—and God and the lawyers only know how much that is—till I die."

"And after you die?"

"After that it goes to Charlie. That is it would have been split between Charlie and any kids Seymour and I had. Only we didn't have any. Seymour was an old man."

"You get plenty then," Shayne said.

"Sure I do, but that doesn't give me motive to kill Seymour," she said with her beautiful eyes fixed on his. "I already had it. I wasn't living on any thousand a month alimony like Elsie. Why should I risk anything for money? The day I and Seymour got married I had it all. Why risk anything?"

"Why indeed?" Shayne said. He wasn't so sure though. He could still think of reasons that might move a beautiful, vibrant woman like this.

"Would this Elsie be able to pull off something like this?" he asked then.

"You mean did she have the opportunity as well as the motive?" Karen asked. "Sure she did. Don't forget she lived with Seymour for years—in this house among others. Most of the servants are people she hired and I have to admit she was popular with them. They'd let her in. In fact she did see



Seymour once in a while here or at her place.

"To talk about Charlie, she said it was for. I couldn't stop that. Not without a fight with Seymour. Besides I told you that Charlie lives here most of the time. He could give her a key if she asked for it. Oh, she had the chance all right."

"You think she did?"

"Who else?" Karen asked. "You're the detective, Mike Shayne. You go be a detective and find the evidence for me."

"I'll go and look," Shayne said. "Mind you I don't say you're right about any of this, but I'll look into it and see."

III

MIKE SHAYNE picked up his car in the driveway in front

of the Wilding Mansion. There was a big brown toad sitting by the front wheel but it hopped away as he approached. The big detective headed back towards the ornate stone gates almost a block away from the front of the big house. Once through the gates he turned to his right to head West towards Biscayne Boulevard.

As he did so a small foreign sports car that had been parked at the dead end of the street where it hit the Bay started up its engine and made a U-turn to follow. It was one of those low-slung jobs with a convertible fabric top that came down close to the driver's head.

Shayne didn't really pay attention. It wasn't unusual for tourists or even natives to park near the sea walls at the end of these streets for fresh air and the view. After dark they were fine spots for lovers also.

He did notice though that the car turned down the Boulevard when he did. It stayed a couple of blocks behind. That wasn't anything to be suspicious about in itself. Lots of people had business in downtown Miami.

Shayne put his car in the parking lot he regularly used and walked the block to his second floor office overlooking Flagler Street.

His secretary, Lucy Hamil-

ton, was busy at her desk when he entered.

"How did it go, Michael?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said and briefed her on his conversation with Karen Wilding.

"Do you believe her?" Lucy asked. "As I remember Karen Steele she was always what I'd guess they call a real swinger these days. Reckless and extravagant and selfish and ready to take any sort of a chance. How good is her word about anything?"

"That's what I've been hired to find out, I suppose."

"For my money," Lucy Hamilton said then, "if there's really been any hanky-panky around the Wilding family my first choice for a suspect would be little Karen."

Shayne leaned back and put his feet up on his desk as he often did to relax.

"I thought of that," he admitted, "and I think Karen thought of it too. She may be all you say, but that kid's no fool on top of the rest of it. She'd know she'd be suspect number one to a lot of folks, so she'd want me on the job to clear her. She knows I'm no fool either. For that reason I don't think I'd be on the job at all unless she was as innocent as she says. If she was trying to hide a murder, she wouldn't

want me within ten miles of the place."

"Maybe," Lucy Hamilton said. "In an odd sort of way that does make sense. On the other hand you don't sound to me as if you were really convinced there was a murder."

"I don't know for sure. I'm still thinking about that. Angel, would you go in the back office and fix me some scrambled eggs and coffee? I missed breakfast, and I'm hungry as a wolf."

While Lucy Hamilton was fixing the eggs for him Mike Shayne leaned back in his swivel chair and tried to think.

Had there really been a murder in the Wilding Mansion? That was the thing he still wasn't sure of. After all, the coroner knew his business and he said snakebite. What if the snake did have straight teeth—or a big mouth so his fangs went in straight? For all that Mike Shayne knew some snakes could be naturally built that way.

On the other hand Will Gentry and Tim Rourke were willing to take the idea of murder seriously. Neither of them were fools.

The clincher in his own mind though was the great wealth which old Seymour Wilding had possessed. Where there's so much money involved the detective knew that any death

not attended by a whole battery of high priced doctors could be suspect.

He'd just about decided what to do when the door to the hallway opened and a man came into the office.

He hadn't bothered to knock.

Also he had a gun in his left hand. It was a very efficient looking snubnosed Police Positive in thirty-eight special caliber. No target gun, but nobody could miss with it at a range of under ten feet and the man stood right in front of Shayne's desk.

"Just sit quiet, Shamus," he said in low but determined tones. "This is no heist. I got a message for you and I want to make sure you get it."

"You don't need that rod then," Mike Shayne said. "I listen to anybody comes in here."

"You won't mind my holding it then," the man said. "It makes my hand feel better." He was a youngish man, not really young but in the early forties, trying to look middle thirties. He was partly bald, which made it a bit harder but his figure was firm and flat-muscled. He had steely grey eyes and a hard jaw. His jacket and slacks were from an expensive Beach men's shop.

"Get on with it," Shayne said.

"You got yourself mixed in the Wilding business," the man said. It was a statement and not a question. "I don't know what you're doing about it, but I know who you are."

"That's fine," Shayne said. "Who are you?"

"None of your damn business," the man said. "Now this is the message and I'm going to say this just once. You stay away from Mrs. Wilding. You hear me? Whatever goes on that they bring a shamus in for, she's got nothing to do with it. You hear me now."

Behind him the door to the back office opened very quietly and Lucy Hamilton stood framed in the doorway. She had a cup of coffee in her left hand and a plate of toast and eggs in the other.

When she saw the man with the gun she suddenly froze in her tracks.

He hadn't seen or heard her yet.

"You mind," he said to Shayne again. "Leave Mrs. Wilding alone. She ain't guilty of a thing. You leave her be. Or else—"

He didn't finish because some sixth sense warned him of Lucy Hamilton's presence. Maybe he felt her eyes on the back of his neck or maybe he just

smelled the coffee and the toast and eggs.

Anyway he turned his head and saw her—and started to swing round towards the door to face her.

Lucy Hamilton threw the plate of hot, soft scrambled eggs in his face.

The man fired the thirty-eight revolver. Because he was halfway round in his swing the gun wasn't pointed at either Mike Shayne or Lucy Hamilton. He must have pulled the trigger purely by reflex. The heavy slug hit a framed photograph of old time Miami dignitaries on the wall and shattered the glass. Actually it shot the head off a long-dead mayor of the city.

Mike Shayne got his feet off the desk top and onto the floor. Then he jump-dived over the top of the desk at the man with the gun.

The man half turned again and hit Shayne a back handed swipe with the gun in his left hand. This time he didn't pull the trigger. The blow knocked Shayne aside so that he sprawled on the floor, scrambling to get up and to pull his own gun at one and the same time.

Lucy Hamilton threw the cup of coffee. It missed the intruder and splashed Mike Shayne in the face with the hot liquid.



The stranger could have shot them both right then if he'd kept his head, but he didn't.

Still holding the gun—and quite literally with egg on his face—he bolted for the exit door.

Just as he got to the door it opened from the outside and Tim Rourke started to come in. They crashed head on, and Rourke went down. Shayne had his gun out but couldn't shoot without hitting his friend.

The stranger took off down the hall for the stairs and safety in the crowded street below.

Tim Rourke got himself up off the floor and dusted off the modish and impeccably tailored Palm Beach suit he was wearing.

"If you don't mind my saying so," he said, "you should tell your clients to be a little more careful how they go in and out of this office."

"That wasn't exactly a client," Shayne said, getting to his own feet and putting his own gun back in the belt holster behind his right hip.

"It was a friend of Mrs. Seymour Wilding," Lucy Hamilton said. "From the way he acted I'd say he was a real close friend too."

"That's just ginger peachy," Rourke said, "but I don't see where it gives him the right to use me for a throw rug on his way out. Incidentally, which Mrs. Wilding did he say he was such a good friend of?"

"Why, Karen of course," Lucy Hamilton said. "You saw what a roughneck he was."

"I think Angel is a little jealous of Karen because I dated her a couple of times in the old days," Shayne said. "As a matter of fact that's a good point, Tim. The guy didn't say."

"Can there be any question?" Lucy Hamilton snorted.

"Sure there can," Shayne said. "I think it probably was a friend of Karen's allright but we don't really know. Come on in and sit down and have a couple of fingers of brandy, Tim."

"Don't mind if I do,"

Rourke said. He took the chair he usually favored besides the large desk, tossed down the drink his big friend offered, and held out his glass for a refill.

"What's at the *News?*" Shayne asked.

"You're not going to believe this," Rourke said and swallowed the second drink. "I'm here for much the same reason the guy knocked me down was. What I mean is, I'm a friend of Mrs. Wilding."

"Little Karen certainly gets around," Lucy Hamilton remarked in slightly acid tones.

"This time you're wrong," Tim Rourke said with a grin. "Elsie Wilding is an old friend of mine. On a bit higher plane of friendship than the maestro and Karen of course. Anyway an old friend."

"So?"

"So she called me at the *News* a little while back. Seemed pretty much broken up by the business of old Seymour dying that way. After all, they had been married for years."

"I can understand," Lucy Hamilton said.

"Sure. Well then, she asked if it was true that the maestro here had been called in. Wouldn't say how she'd heard about that. I told her she was right and that you were a good friend of mine and the best private operative in town."

"Thanks," Shayne said.

"Just put it on my next bill for P.R. services," Tim Rourke smiled. "Anyway Elsie asked me to bring you down to see her. She wants to talk to you about the case. Wouldn't give any details on the phone, but she said it was very important. Very, very important."

"Where does she live?"

"She has a little place in what they call the High Pines area, off Red Road in South Miami. We can be there in twenty minutes from a standing start right here."

"Let's go," Mike Shayne said. "I've been thinking I ought to meet the lady."

IV

ELsie WILDING'S home was in a quiet, tree shaded neighborhood of older twenty-five thousand dollar homes. Most of them had big yards and luxuriant plantings of flowers and ornamental tropical shrubs. There was a two year old medium priced sedan parked in the car port.

Mike Shayne left his car out by the street, and he and Tim Rourke took the walk of flagstones set in the close-cropped Bermuda grass. The path skirted a clump of three big bushes covered with the lacy Chinese Hibiscus blooms.

There were two big toads sitting by the path under the hanging blooms. One was yellowish and ugly. The other was brown with a mottled diamond back. It was the biggest toad Shayne had ever seen. He thought it must tip the scales at a good three pounds. It regarded him with a bland eye, refusing to move even when he passed within a foot of it.

They went on up to the house and rang the bell, which was answered almost at once.

"Hello, Elsie," Tim Rourke said to the woman who opened the door. "I brought Mike Shayne, like you asked me to."

"Thank you, Tim," she said. "Won't you both come in?"

Elsie Wilding, like her successor Karen, was a beautiful woman, but in a markedly different way. She was an older woman for one thing, older and with a dignity, poise and innate manner of sophistication that the younger second wife lacked. Face and figure were still attractive to any man. She had soft brown hair, showing no strands of grey. Her brown eyes were still youthful. Only the firm lips and the set of the mouth showed a capacity for decision and determination which the rest of her appearance belied.

"Come into the living room," she said to the two

men. "There's a bottle of whiskey and glasses on the coffee table. Help yourselves."

They followed her in and took seats. Rourke took a drink, but Shayne waved his away. He thought he saw approval in the woman's eyes.

"As Tim may or may not have told you," Elsie Wilding said to the big detective, "I'm a woman who believes in getting straight to the heart of things and not beating around the bush."

She paused slightly.

"I like that," Mike Shayne said.

"I'm glad you do," she said. "Then I won't mince words with you, Mr. Shayne. I asked Tim Rourke to bring you here because I'm afraid I will be charged with the murder of my former husband, Seymour Wilding."

"Did you kill him?" Shayne asked.

"No, Mr. Shayne, I did not. As God is my witness, I did not kill Seymour."

"Then you don't have anything to worry about."

She got up and stood in front of the window for a moment, unconsciously making a picture of beauty for the two men to see. Then she turned to face them directly.

"Mr. Shayne, Tim—I said I was going to be perfectly open

and direct with you. I expect equal frankness in return. We all know that in this life things are seldom simple or clear cut. There are times when the innocent really do have something to fear in spite of their innocence. This is one of those times."

Neither of the men said anything.

"Here it is," she said in firm and even tones. "You all know that when a very rich man, someone like my late husband, dies violently and alone, there is suspicion of foul play. In this case I believe that suspicion will prove justified. Chief Gentry and his people will find out, if they do not already know it, that Seymour Wilding was murdered.

"As his former wife, and as a major beneficiary from his estate, I am going to be suspected of that murder. They will say that I had the motive. I do not expect them to believe that for me just money is no motive."

She paused and Mike Shayne said: "They would also have to find that you had the opportunity to kill Mr. Wilding. That could be a great deal harder for them to do. Motive alone is not enough to make a case."

She held up a hand to stop him.

"That's just it, Mr. Shayne.

Unfortunately and although I swear to you that I am innocent, I—am certain that the police will be able to prove opportunity."

"How can they do that, Elsie?" Tim Rourke asked.

"They can do it," she said. "I was in the house at the time when Seymour Wilding died."

The three of them looked at each other for long seconds there in the quiet, attractive drawing room of Elsie Wilding's beautiful suburban home.

The thing she had said was almost tangible between them for a long moment.

Then Mike Shayne broke the silence. "If you were there, Mrs. Wilding, I'm sure you must have had a good reason or you wouldn't be telling us about it. Suppose you give me the details and let me take it from there."

"Thank you," she said. "Yes, gentlemen, I did have a good reason to be in the house, and you can believe me that it had nothing at all to do with killing poor Seymour. In spite of everything that had gone before I bore him no ill will of that sort."

"I believe you," Tim Rourke said.

"The reason I was there," Elsie Wilding continued, "was to see about my son Charles. He lives with me here, really, but he has a suite of rooms in his

father's home also and spends a good bit of his time there. Seymour loved the boy very much and liked to have him there and of course I didn't object.

"Anyway Charles had spent the last few days before his father's death in his rooms there. I knew he would be out of his medication; he has an allergy that bothers him very much this time of year."

"I had to go to my hairdresser in the Bal Harbor shops that morning and I decided to drop by and leave Charles his pills on my return. It wasn't out of my way."

"Did you have regular access to Charles' rooms at his father's?" Shayne asked.

"Yes I did," she said. "I know it must seem odd to you gentlemen, but there was really no bitterness between Seymour and myself."

"I may believe you," Shayne said, "but a jury might find it hard to accept. Didn't the present Mrs. Wilding object?"

"Karen Wilding? Oh I suppose she must have at times. I couldn't blame her. Actually though I didn't make a regular practice of dropping in there. Sometimes there were things I had to go over with Seymour."

"You would see him as well as the boy?"

"On occasion I would. Not

on this particular day though."

"You did see your son though on that day?" Mike Shayne was persistent.

"No. He wasn't in the house when I came. At least I didn't see him. The servants let me in. They know I was there. I went up to Charles' room and left the medicine on the dresser where he'd find it. Then I went down the back stairs and out to where I'd left my car parked near the garage behind the house. I did not see Seymour at all. Afterwards I found out it must have been about the time he died. I was in the house at ten in the morning while he was dying, but I didn't know that. I swear it."

"Did the servants see you leave?" Shayne asked.

"No, I don't think they did. There wasn't anyone in the kitchen when I left. I suppose they were about their duties elsewhere in the house. It was too early to start fixing lunch and late enough so the breakfast things were all cleared away."

"That's too bad," the big detective said. "It would help if we could establish when you left."

"I'm sorry but that's the way it was."

"One more thing," Shayne said. "While you were in the house that day did you notice

anything at all unusual? I mean—let's assume for a moment that your ex-husband wasn't bitten by a snake that had gotten into the house by accident. Let's say the police decide there may have been a murder. In that case did you see or hear anything at all unusual? I mean anything at all, no matter how slight, that might give us a clue to the killer or even how and when the killing was done? It could be very important. Think hard."

"No, I don't believe so. Of course I wasn't looking for anything."

"Don't hold anything back, Elsie," Tim Rourke said. "No matter how trivial it may seem to you. It could have meaning to Mike."

She seemed to be struggling with herself. "Well, there was something. I don't really suppose it means anything, but Mrs. Wilding's, Karen's car wasn't in its usual parking spot. It was parked in the drive quite a bit behind the garage. I wouldn't have seen it at all if I hadn't used the back gate to leave the estate. That was unusual."

"Does she drive a foreign sports job?" Shayne asked, thinking of the small red car that had followed him.

"Oh no indeed. She drives a custom Rolls that Seymour

ordered for her from England. Black, with her monogram in real gold on the doors. Nothing but the best for her."

"I see."

"She almost always drives that car, Mr. Shayne. If it was parked there she must have been in the house."

"She was in the house alright, Elsie," Tim Rourke said. "She told the police that. While her husband was dying her personal maid was giving her a massage in the private gym on the third floor rear. The maid confirmed that when she was questioned."

"Oh, I'm sorry then," Elsie Wilding said. "I guess the car being parked there didn't mean anything then. It was unusual though. I'd never seen it in that spot before. So when you asked me just now—I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Mike Shayne said. "In a case of murder anything can be important. Thank you for talking to us. We'll keep in touch with you."

"Thank you. I feel better for telling you about it."

She walked the two men out to Shayne's car.

As they passed the bush beside the path the big man said: "Coming in just now the biggest toad I ever saw was under this bush."

"I'll look for it," she said. "It should be killed. They're a

real danger to the pet dogs around here. A couple of spaniels have died of the poison."

"I never heard of a poison toad," Shayne said. "Do they bite dogs? The one I saw was big enough."

"Oh no," she said. "It's the dogs that bite the toads. They secrete some sort of poison from their glands that kills the dog."

"They come from South America," Rourke said. "Bufo something-or-other they call them. An immigrant like the Jap water hyacinth and the walking catfish."

"I wish once in a while we'd get an immigrant plant or animal that would do us some good," Shayne said.

V

WHEN SHAYNE pulled out of the driveway of Elsie Wilding's home and turned his car back towards Red Road to the west he caught a flash of movement two blocks behind him.

A small red foreign sports car with a canvas top hiding the driver from view had pulled away from the curb and was following.

The big detective spun his own car round in a fast U-turn and headed back.



Tim Rourke

He wasn't fast enough. The little red bug made a U-turn of its own and took off down one of the side streets. The area was heavily wooded, and the streets twisted and turned. In a short time Mike Shayne had lost any chance he might ever have had of overtaking the fast-moving sports job.

"What was that all about?" Tim Rourke asked.

"That was the same car that followed me when I left Karen's place earlier today," Mike Shayne said. "What will you bet the driver was the same punk who ran over you back at the office?"

"You're seeing things," Rourke said. "Half the rich kids in a neighborhood like this have a car like that. Never could see why anybody'd want one myself. So small your chin's on your knees when you drive it. What did you think of my old friend Elsie?"

"A beautiful and attractive woman," Shayne said, "but that's about par for the course for your old friends. It doesn't guarantee she couldn't have killed her ex-husband."

"Oh come off it, Mike. Elsie isn't that sort. I've known her for years and she isn't capable of murder."

"I wish I had your gift of second sight then," his big friend laughed. "Now me, on first meeting I can't tell Jack The Ripper from a meat cutter in the kitchen of the Jockey Club. Fifty million dollars can do a lot to change old friends."

"You're a cynic," Rourke said. "Anyway, between the two Mrs. Wildings my choice for a killing is sweet little Karen. Of course, I never dated her back when she was a stripper so I don't know her as

well as you do. Let's go someplace and get us a long cold drink."

That was when the buzzer of the car phone on the dashboard of the detective's car began to sound off. Mike Shayne picked up the instrument and said: "Hello."

"Michael?" said Lucy Hamilton's voice in his ear.

"This is room service," Shayne said and laughed.

"I'm glad I caught you," Lucy Hamilton said. "Michael, somebody by the name of Reddo Morgan has called you twice in the last ten minutes. He sounds tough and he sounds angry. He says you'll know who he is."

"I know him, Angel," Shayne said. "He's a real hard boy. He owns the One-Eighty-Club uptown. He plays rough when he plays at all."

"I thought it was something like that," Lucy said. "He wants you to come see him. Now, he says—and makes it sound like now was ten minutes ago."

"With Reddo it usually is," Shayne agreed. "When he calls again you tell him Tim and I are on our way over. Be sure you tell him Tim is with me. He won't want to gun me down with the white-haired boy of the *News* right there taking notes for the states attorney."

"Will do," she said. "Be careful, Michael."

It was a forty minute drive from South Miami to the northside strip of Biscayne Boulevard up near the county line, where the One-Eighty-Club club sat in the midst of four acres of beautifully landscaped and very valuable grounds.

At this time of the mid-afternoon the Club wasn't operating, either under its cover of a high-priced restaurant, or in its real capacity as a top-level gambling house.

The big ornamental iron gates were closed across the drive leading in from the gatehouse. When Shayne touched the horn of his car a hard faced man in dungarees and a loud sports shirt came out of the gatehouse.

"We ain't open," he said. In case anyone wanted to argue, there was a gun in a shoulder holster under the sports shirt.

"You just tell Reddo I'm here," Shayne said.

The tough gave the big redhead some unpleasant and unprintable personal advice.

Shayne's left hand came out of the car window so fast the tough never saw it move. He got an iron grip on the back of the man's neck and hauled his head into the car.

At the same time Shayne's right hand got the shoulder gun,

a flat, blue .380 Browning, out of its holster. He put the barrel of the gun into the man's mouth and worked it up and down, splintering a couple of incisor teeth in the process.

The man gave an incoherent howl of pain.

"When I let go of you," Shayne said, "you push the button that unlocks the gates. After I'm through and on the drive, you call Reddo and tell him Mike Shayne and Tim Rourke are on the way in. That's all you do."

"Okay," the hood said.

Shayne let go of his neck and waited while the man opened the gates. Then he drove through.

"That's my gun," the hood said.

"Tell Reddo to buy you another," Shayne told him. "I think he can afford it."

As he drove on he handed the gun to Tim Rourke. The reporter checked it over and then stuck it under his belt.

"You don't really think I need this, do you," the lanky Rourke asked his big friend.

"How do I know?" Shayne said. "All I do know for sure is anybody in the same room with Reddo Morgan without a gun is naked as a jay bird in January. Besides, the gun didn't cost you anything. Keep it for a souvenir."

A servant in the livery of the gambling house let them in the front door. The two men followed him through the big restaurant room where busboys were setting up the tables with Irish linen cloths, crystal goblets and sterling silver. A place of this sort surely could afford the very best for its patrons.

A door from the dining room led into the back of the building, where the really important business of the house would be transacted later on. At the moment the roulette, dice, faro and poker tables were discreetly shrouded by green baize covers.

This room was two stories tall. Up under the ceiling an ornamental grille of copper and chrome ran clear around the room. Later on that night Shayne knew that armed guards would be walking the catwalk back of that grille. They would be invisible to the patrons on the floor, but nothing that happened down below would escape their keen eyes.

The guns they carried would be automatic machine pistols, probably the Israeli designed Uzzis; they could spray death as a hose sprays water.

Shayne wondered if any of the guards were already posted there, as he and Rourke passed below. It would be good to

know if he had to fight his way out.

He decided in that case to use a route that avoided the gambling room.

Reddo Morgan's office resembled the board room of a major New York bank in its quiet and expensive elegance.

Reddo Morgan's office reed the door for them and waved their guide away. "I'm glad you came, Shayne," he said.

"What do you want to see me about?" the big detective asked.

"Didn't you know?" Morgan asked. "It's the six hundred and fifty thousand dollars, of course."

VI

MIKE SHAYNE stood stock still on the deep-piled office carpet with a face designed to hide a non-existent poker hand. He wanted to say: "What six hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"—but that would give away the fact that he hadn't the faintest idea what the gambler was talking about.

He just stood there and said: "Oh."

Reddo Morgan put his head back and roared with laughter. The gangster wasn't called Reddo because he'd been christened with that name. It was a nickname he'd carried

since he was able to toddle around his parents' slum flat.

He had red hair, even the hair on his barrel chest and the backs of his hands. He was liberally adorned with red freckles. Some people even swore that his gold-brown eyes and his skin had a reddish tinge.

The nickname was a natural.

To all of this natural endowment the man added a taste for the color itself. His office carpet was red and so was the predominant tone of the oil paintings on the walls. He wore a ruby ring and garnet cuff links. His slacks were salmon and his tie was a flaming red.

The beautiful girl in the mini-uniform who was mixing drinks at a portable bar in one corner of the office was—what else—a redhead.

"Welcome, Red," Morgan said to the big, redhead Mike Shayne. "Sit down and let's put away a shot of redeye." Then he roared with laughter again.

Mike Shayne took the proffered chair by the desk and accepted the glass the girl brought him. It smelled like top quality bourbon, but he put it down on the desk top untasted.

Tim Rourke took a chair beside him and drank some of his liquor with appreciation.

Reddo Morgan sat behind his desk. "You can trust the drink,"



he told Shayne. "No knockout drops. No rough stuff. I heard about how you toss people on top of their own steak grilles, big man. You forget about that sort of ruckus right now. This call is strictly business."

"I'm glad to hear it," Shayne said.

"Sure you are," Reddo told him. "Only of course you wish you knew what six hundred and fifty grand I'm talking about."

Mike Shayne managed to keep his silence and his poker face.

"It's alright," Reddo Morgan said. "Unless little Karen told you about it, you wouldn't know. If I know her, she

wouldn't tell you any more than she had to."

"Now we're getting down to the nitty gritty," Tim Rourke said, although no one had addressed him directly.

Reddo Morgan ignored the interruption and went on talking directly to the silent Mike Shayne.

"It isn't a secret you're working for Karen Steele-Wilding I mean," he said. "Also it doesn't take a genius to figure out the police will be looking into old Seymour's death real careful. I would if I was them. You get all that money, and you say some snake got in and finished him off. That don't wash."

He paused and watched Mike Shayne, but the big man still said nothing.

"Okay," Reddo continued. "I know what Karen hired you for. You're supposed to prove she didn't scrag the old man. In her place I'd hire you for the same thing, Shayne. They say you're the best in the game."

"That's fine," Shayne said, "only what's it got to do with you calling me in here?"

"Everything is what it's got to do with it," Reddo said. "You see, Karen isn't over all her old habits she had before she got to be Mrs. Richbitch of nineteen and seventy-two. One of them habits she had was

gambling. She never shook that one."

"My God, man," Tim Rourke burst out. "You aren't trying to tell us she owes you six hundred and fifty thousand dollars. You can't be."

"That's exactly what I am telling you," Reddo said. "I got the tabs locked up in my safe if it comes to that."

"Whew!" Rourke said, and gulped his drink.

"Let the man finish, Tim," the detective said quietly.

"Exactly," Reddo Morgan said. "The young widow Wilding, if you let me coin a phrase, is on the hook for all that government lettuce. Why not? It's one of the world's biggest fortunes, ain't it? She's good for it. That is, she's good as gold for it as long as it wasn't her arranged for the old boy to be snake bit."

"I see," Shayne said. "Under Florida law, if she killed him or had him killed she can't inherit one dollar of his money. Isn't that it?"

"That's what my lawyers tell me," Reddo agreed. "So I can't afford to run the risk of little Karen getting tagged with Murder One. That's why I called you in here, Shayne. I want you to prove that girl innocent. I want her clean as a Easter Lily, so she can write checks to cover the tabs I got in

my safe. You read me, big man?"

"I read you," Mike Shayne said. "Aren't you forgetting I'm already hired to do that?"

"I know, but not the way I'm hiring you. Go ahead and collect everything little Karen pays you. That's fine. On top of it, I got something extra."

Reddo pushed a button on his desk. The woman must have been waiting outside the door to his left because she came right in.

This was another buxom and busty redhead like the girl who had served the drinks, only this one wore a trim, tailored secretarial suit instead of the dress of a waitress. The effect would have been very business-like except that the blouse she wore was a see-through and it covered nothing but the girl herself.

Tim Rourke was all eyes.

The girl walked over to Mike Shayne and handed him an envelope. It was unsealed, and inside was a check with his name on it and made out in the amount of twenty-five thousand dollars.

"I don't know if I should take this," the big man said, holding the check.

"If you'd rather have cash that's okay by me," Reddo said. "Ruby can fetch it for you right now."

"That isn't what I'm thinking," Shayne said directly. "You wouldn't give me a bum check. I must know what's really behind this, Reddo. What are the strings tied to this check?"

The gambling house boss gave him a keenly appraising look. "You don't think six hundred and fifty G's is motive enough?"

"Not for twenty-five thousand dollars. Not when you're already sure I have been hired to do this job without a dime from you. You know this won't make me work any harder. So what is it you want?"

Reddo looked at Tim Rourke as he waved his secretary out of the room. "Will he stay clammed up?"

"For me he will," Shayne said.

Reddo appeared to think it over before he spoke. Then: "Okay, Shayne, I level with you. I got more interest in Karen than the tabs. Maybe she didn't tell you that her old man was a very old man. Karen isn't that old. She and me has had something going."

"She owes me that dough like I said, but I got a personal interest in seeing she stays healthy and gets to spend that money. Real personal."

"Suppose I find out she's guilty?" Shayne said.

"You won't," Reddo Morgan said and Mike Shayne realized it was the second time that day he'd been told the same thing about Karen Wilding.

"You won't," Reddo repeated. "I know that. If you did, big man, I'd give you two choices. Either me and you would make a reasonable business deal or I'd put out a contract on you that would have them coming all the way from Tokyo to take your head. I ain't joking."

"I'm not buying," Shayne said. "Not on those terms. I do an honest job or no job at all."

"Pick up that check," Reddo said. "I ain't worried about what you find. Karen didn't scrag the old goat. Why should she? He hadn't long to live, whatever way you slice the stuff. All she had to do was wait. I wasn't pressing her for them tabs. I can wait too."

Shayne looked at him.

"Pick up the check," Reddo Morgan said. This time he was obviously asking instead of commanding.

"I'll level with you all the way. I got another reason to hire you. Whoever done old Seymour in is going to want the money for himself. He can get it by framing Karen for murder or by murdering her too. She's innocent, so as long as she lives

she has to be target number one for the real killer. I want her protected till the killer is found. You can do both those things and I don't know anybody else can. I can't go to the cops myself and my boys are not detectives. You can do it for me if you will."

Shayne picked up the check then.

"No strings," he said. "You're betting this she's innocent, because if she did kill Seymour I won't cover for her."

"Okay," Reddo Morgan said. "Okay."

VII

MIKE SHAYNE put the twenty-five thousand dollar check in his pocket. He wasn't at all sure that he believed the promise of "no strings on the money" that Reddo Morgan had just made.

On the other hand he was sure that if he didn't take the check he and Tim Rourke might not get out of the One Eighty Club alive. Reddo Morgan had said things he wouldn't want to be known by police or by his rivals in the rackets, particularly about his affair with Karen Wilding.

He had to feel Shayne was working for him, was his man and would keep his secrets.



Otherwise, he'd give his goons the word to kill.

That reminded Shayne of something else that was on his mind.

"Look here, Reddo," he said. "If you wanted to talk about this yourself, why did you send that goon of yours to put a gun on me in my office?"

"What are you talking about?" Reddo asked. "I sent no goon to your office. When I wanted to see you I called that sweet girl of yours. That's all."

Mike Shayne told about the gunman. He described the man to the gambler and saw recognition dawn in the man's hard eyes.

"That dirty little two-timer!" he burst out then. "So he's been hanging around Karen

in spite of me. Don't that little broad ever get enough men?"

"I wouldn't know about that part of it," Mike Shayne said. "Who was the man if he isn't one of yours?"

"He's a nogood punk been sweet on Karen for a couple of years now," Reddo Morgan said. "Matter of fact he and she were a shack job once years ago. Name's Burky O'Bannion. Sometimes a small time heist man. Mostly a race track rail bird. Maybe pushes a little pot to the high school crowd on the side. He's a punk. A punk who's gonna wish he never come to town when Reddo Morgan catches up to him."

Shayne could see that the man was genuinely furious.

"Does this Burky drive a red sports car?" he asked. "One of those little foreign jobs?"

"How would I know what a punk like that drives?" Reddo Morgan demanded. "I know what I got in mind for him though. One of them big hearses they take you to the cemetery in would look good on him. Hope you find out who killed old man Wilding, and quick. But leave the worrying about them punks to me and my boys."

Mike Shayne was glad to be out of the One-Eighty-Club, and on his way. It was getting on to late afternoon by then,

and Biscayne Boulevard was filling up with traffic as shoppers started home and working people got away from their jobs. In another hour it would be a bumper-to-bumper crawl for a good ten miles on either side of Flagler Street.

"Where away now, maestro?" Tim Rourke asked as he lounged beside his big friend in the front seat of the car.

"The first thing I want," Shayne said, "is to stop off in Morningside Park and have another chat with the widow Wilding. Couple of points I think she better clear up for me."

"I gather the little lady wasn't completely frank with you this morning."

Shayne said: "After listening to good old Reddo Morgan I wonder that she even told me her right name."

"Reddo seems to think she couldn't possibly be a suspect," Tim Rourke pointed out. "Why else did he take the strings off of that check for twenty five grand you've got in your pocket right now?"

"He didn't take the strings off anything," Shayne said. "You know better than that, Tim. A character like Reddo Morgan never does anything without strings to it. He just said he took them off."

"Anyway I agree with one

thing he said," Tim Rourke said. "Why should Karen kill her old man? All she had to do is to wait."

"Maybe she got impatient," Shayne said. "Look Tim, anybody whose life is as mixed up as Karen's, is always a good suspect for murder. I know that even if you have forgotten it."

When they reached the mansion in Morningside Park Mike Shayne told Rourke to wait in the car.

"This shouldn't take more than a few minutes," he said. "Then we'll go on some place and get us a steak. I've got a hunch this could be a long, rough night."

A colored manservant in a white jacket ushered Mike Shayne into the library on the ground floor.

"I'll tell Mrs. Wilding you're here, sir. It may be a few minutes before she can see you. Make yourself comfortable here while you wait."

"Is anyone with her?" Shayne asked.

The servant didn't answer directly.

"I'll tell her you are here, sir," he repeated and softly closed the door to the big central hallway.

Shayne didn't sit down immediately. This was the room where old Seymour Wilding had died and he wanted to take the

opportunity of getting a better look around.

It was a big room, a man's room and arranged for comfort. Shelves of books and occasional art objects lined three walls that were broken only by the doors to the hall and to a small lavatory on one side. The hall door closed snugly over a high sill. No snake could get in that way when it was closed. The lavatory had no other door and only one small window high up on the wall. The window looked as if it hadn't been opened recently.

Shayne checked around the plumbing fixtures. The pipes were closed off by brass washers where they came through the floor and walls. Nothing bigger than a medium sized roach or palmetto bug could have squeezed through around them, certainly not a snake of any size.

The whole west side of the room was a floor to ceiling bay window with small, heavily leaded panes in the style of a half century back when the house had been built. Central panes could be opened for the air, but all these panes were heavily screened with top quality bronze screening held in by heavy screws. There was no break in the screening anywhere.

As far as Shayne could see

any snake in that room could only have come in through the door. Of course that could have been at any time for days or weeks before Seymour Wilding died. The snake could have hidden under something or back of a row of books.

On the other hand, when they found Seymour dead the library door was firmly closed. To get out a snake would have had to use the door and close it behind itself.

Snakes don't do that sort of thing.

No snake had been found in the room.

Mike Shayne was pretty sure that no snake had ever been in this room, at least not the sort that crawls and bites.

Shayne sat down in the big chair facing the desk and looking out the windows at late afternoon sunshine slanting across the lawn. That was where the old millionaire must have been sitting the afternoon he died.

The thought of a snake creeping up with poison fangs made Shayne's flesh creep. He could sense it. He imagined he could hear the faintest of scraping sounds, a creeping of scales in the room.

Imagine?

Mike Shayne twisted the chair, snatching for the gun in his belt.

As he turned there was the lightest of feathery touches against his cheek.

The room door was closed, or had just finished closing. He couldn't tell. He was alone. No snake on the floor.

He turned then and saw it. Stuck in the parchment shade of the bronze desk lamp, just about level with where his face had been, was the tiniest puff of feathers and a sliver of a dart no bigger than the end of a toothpick.

VIII

MIKE SHAYNE sat perfectly still for a long moment, watching the closed door of the Wilding library. He decided that it must have been briefly opened and then closed.

The brief, slithering sound that had alerted the big man and saved his life had to have been the friction of the bottom of the door itself on the very deep pile of the luxurious carpet.

If his subconscious mind hadn't recognized a danger signal so that he moved so swiftly, the little dart now sticking in the lampshade would have penetrated the face of his skin or neck instead. As it was the miss had been so close that the tiny feathers had brushed his face.

The big man had no illusions about what the result would have been if the dart had found its mark.

Swift and deadly poison would have coursed through his system, paralyzing his muscles, immobilizing his brain and resulting in death within a matter of minutes.

Very carefully, using a handkerchief to cover his fingers, Shayne removed the little dart from the parchment lampshade. As he expected, it was basically a sliver of bamboo, sharpened at one end and with a tuft of downy feathers tied by thread to the blunt end.

This was a dart similar to that used by so many jungle tribes around the world to kill man or beast. It could be shot through a jungle blow gun, an old-fashioned child's tin pea shooter or even a tube formed by rolling together a couple of sheets of typewriter paper. Anyone could make it and shoot it.

What anyone couldn't do however was produce the lethal substance coating the sharp point of the dart. There wasn't much of it; a few drops of a white gum of some sort. It was fresh enough, he noted, so that it was still gummy, not yet dried hard.

That was the poison. With-

out it the little dart was a toy, but with that gum a silent and deadly weapon. Mike Shayne felt an icy finger touch his spine with an involuntary shiver at the thought.

He got an envelope out of one of the desk drawers and very carefully wrapped the little dart in his handkerchief and sealed the flap. He put the envelope in his jacket pocket.

This time he heard the knob turn and the library door begin to open. He turned and saw Karen Wilding come into the room.

"I'm sorry, Mike," she said. "I was dressing when I heard you were here. Have you found out anything that clears me."

Mike Shayne gave it to her without compunction. "I found out about that six hundred and fifty thousand bucks you forgot to mention."

Karen Wilding managed to return his gaze with wide and innocent eyes.

"That was none of your business," she said. "Go ask Reddo. He was perfectly willing to wait for his money. Believe me, Mike, he wasn't pressing me for the money, and I wouldn't have killed Seymour for it if he had."

"I believe you," Shayne said. "I already talked to Reddo. He talked to me. I know your credit was good with him."

"Then what—"

"He told me the rest of it about the two of you," Shayne said. "You should have told me first."

"Reddo talks too much," she said.

"It's you that should have talked," Shayne said. "I'm supposed to be working for you. Reddo told me about Burkey O'Bannion too."

"Burkey means nothing to me," she said.

"He means something to me," Shayne said. "Especially when he comes busting into my office today waving a rod at me."

"Burkey always was stupid," she said. "I can see he didn't manage to hurt you, whatever else did happen. If he tries it again don't mess him up too bad, Mike. He gets by because he's kind of cute. I wouldn't want you to spoil him."

"My heart bleeds for the punk," Shayne said. "See to it you keep him off my back. That's all. Keep him off my back."

"I told you I have nothing to do with him," Karen Wilding said. "Reddo yes, Burkey no. Besides I have more important news for you than that. Dear old Elsie, my ex's first ex, was right here in the house when Seymour bit the bullet. The servants told me. Now why

didn't you find that out if you're such a hot-shot detective?"

"I did," Shayne said. "I know she was here and I know what for."

"So?" Karen was obviously surprised by this announcement of Shayne's. She'd expected to spring a jolt on him.

"She says she never saw Seymour that day," Shayne said. "She sounded like she meant it too. Unless you can show me some kind of proof that she did see him, I'm going to have to take her word for it for now."

"You know so damned much," Karen said. "Do you know who killed Seymour?"

"I'm beginning to think I do," Shayne said, more to get her reaction than for any other reason, "Only thing is I can't quite prove it yet. Soon, but not yet."

She just got madder. "You know it all, Mike. You always did. Did you know Elsie is upstairs right now? With that Charlie brat of Seymour's?"

IX

THAT WAS a surprise for the big redhead. A moment before he'd been just about sure that the deadly poisoned dart could only have been shot at him by Karen or one of her

people. He'd even been thinking about grilling the servants in case one of them was involved. Now those possibilities still remained to be looked into of course, but the whole thing was vastly complicated by the fact that the other major suspect in the murder of Seymour Wilding had also been in the house when the attack was made.

"Where is she now?" Mike Shayne asked, trying to keep his poker face from showing any emotions.

"Right where you'd expect," Karen said with a smile that showed she relished the surprise she'd handed him. "The two of them are up in dear little Charlie's rooms, packing his stuff. She doesn't want him sleeping here now that his dad's dead. Probably thinks I'm a bad influence."

"Take me to see them," Shayne said. "I want to have a talk with Ellen Wilding right now."

"Take you nothing," Karen said. "I don't talk to her and she doesn't talk to me. Go up to the second floor and down to the rooms at the end of the West wing. You can't miss it. And Mike, you don't have to tell them about Reddo do you? I mean—"

"I know what you mean," Shayne said. "Don't worry. You hired me first." He



WILL GENTRY

omitted to tell her that Reddo Morgan had also hired him.

He found the rooms he was looking for without any difficulty. Ellen Morgan was about finished packing the two big suitcases that were on her bed.

Charlie Wilding wasn't helping his mother. He stood over by the window, looking out across the landscaped grounds. He was a thin, nervous boy with a face that Shayne decided must always wear either a sullen or a worried expression.

Shayne knocked at the open door and both of them looked his way.

"Who are you?" Charlie asked.

"Why hello, Mr. Shayne," Ellen said straightening up and brushing a lock of hair back from her face. "This is the detective I was telling you about, Charles."

"Oh," the boy said in a petulant tone, "I thought maybe he was just another one of Karen's friends." He managed to make a sneer out of the word "friend" by his tone and his look.

"I am a friend of hers," Shayne said easily. "I hope that doesn't keep me from being a friend of your mother's too."

"Not that kind of friend," Charlie said, and turned his back on the room to look out the window.

"You'll have to forgive Charles," his mother said. "Since his father's death he hasn't really been himself at all. You can understand what a terrible blow it would be to the boy."

Mike Shayne looked at the thin, tense back over by the window. "I can understand."

"Was there something you wanted to ask me?" Elsie Wilding said. "You know I'm glad to do anything I can to help out with your investigation." "I know," Shayne said. "I wanted to tell you I've been making real progress with the case. A lot better than I

thought I would when I talked to you earlier."

He had left the door to the hallway open deliberately. If Karen Wilding had followed him upstairs, she would be able to hear what he said.

"That's fine," Elsie said, and her voice sounded really pleased. "The sooner we get all this suspicion and fear and hatred over with the better for all of us."

"I know," the big man said. "Until it's cleared up everybody will be a suspect and afraid. Anyway, as I said, it shouldn't be long before I have the killer. By that I mean not only know who it is but have proof that will stand up in court for a conviction. I wanted you to know that."

"I'm so glad," she said again. "I wish you the very best of luck in your investigation."

"By the way," Shayne asked casually, "have you two been right here together since you came up this time?"

"Why yes," Elsie said. "However we've each made a couple of trips down the back stairs with stuff to put in my car. Except for that we've been right here."

When Mike Shayne finally got back to his car he found Tim Rourke waiting in the front seat.

"You took long enough,"

the *News* writer said. "I began to think you'd be in there the rest of the day."

"Somebody else thought it would be a good idea if I never came out. At least not alive, that is." Shayne told him friend about the deadly little poisoned dart that had been fired at him.

"Both the women who are the prime suspects were in the house at the time too," he said. "Either one could have slipped down and shot that thing at me."

"They aren't the only ones," Tim Rourke said. "A few minutes back I got tired of sitting here in the heat and got out of the car to stretch my legs and have a cigarette. I walked over past the end of the house and what did I see but a man making a fast sneak down the path to the back gate. I barely got a glimpse of him and he was going pretty fast, but I could swear it was the same character that ran over me coming out of your office this morning."

"Burkey O'Bannion," Mike Shayne said. "So he had the chance too."

"It looks like you had a full cast on hand, maestro."

"One thing sure."

"What's that?"

"The one who murdered Seymour Wilding was there. If we could only just put a name to him—"

"Or her."

"That's right, Tim. Or her."

"Do you really have any idea who the killer is?" Tim Rourke asked as Shayne started the car and drove back to the Boulevard.

"I think I do—now," Shayne said and managed to put a considerable emphasis on the last word.

"There's a lot of likely suspects," his friend pointed out. "Even Reddo Morgan wouldn't be past arranging a few funerals, if he was hot enough for Karen."

"I said I think I know, Tim. There are a few facts I need to get straightened out, and then I'll be ready to make my move."

X

MIKE SHAYNE drove south and then west directly to the Miami Police Station in the sprawling complex of government buildings at North West Twelfth Ave and the Miami River.

As he'd hoped he found his old friend Chief Will Gentry in his beautifully panelled office. The Chief broke out a bottle of good brandy and three glasses and sat the two friends down close to his big desk.

"What can I do for you boys?" the Chief began.

"It's that Seymour Wilding case," Shayne explained. "You know the widow Karen has hired me to clear her name."

"That could be quite a job," Gentry said and laughed. "How are you coming with it?"

"Too early to know for sure," Mike Shayne said. He took the envelope out of his jacket pocket and shook out the little dart on the desk blotter.

"One thing you can do," he said as Chief Gentry and Tim Rourke bent over to examine the wicked little weapon. "You can have your boys down in the lab analyze the stuff on the point of this thing. Tell them to be careful how they handle it, because I'm sure it's a poison and a powerful one."

"Can do," Gentry said, and pushed a button on his desk. "It may take a little time though."

"Tell them to push it," Shayne said, "and when they know what this is have them compare it with what killed Seymour Wilding. I've got a hunch it was the same poison."

"That might be a little harder to prove," the Chief said.

"I know, but they can give it a try anyway."

"What do you think it is?"

"I think I know," Shayne assured them. "I don't want to

put any ideas in the lab boys' heads though. Let them work it out for themselves."

When a sergeant from the lab had come in and taken the dart away to have its poison chemically analyzed, Gentry turned to his friends again.

"While you've been running loose getting poison shot at you my people haven't been exactly sitting on their hands. For one thing the servants up there tell us that Elsie Wilding was in the house when Seymour died."

He paused to see how they'd react.

"Elsie told us that herself," Tim Rourke said. "She was also in the place when that thing was shot at Mike here."

"So was everybody else but the mayor," Shayne said. "We know about Karen's little extra-curricular games too, if that was on your mind."

"It was," Chief Gentry said. "Reddo Morgan and that fancy boy O'Bannion at one and the same time. Either one of them could have done it to make sure of getting Karen and all that money for himself."

"All they had to do was wait," Shayne pointed out.

"Unless Seymour was starting to get wise to what was going on," Gentry said then. "We're trying to check that now, but so far we have no proof. Karen divorced would be

small peanuts compared to the widow Wilding. If Seymour was getting smart it would give her a motive as well as either or both of the men. Had you thought of that?"

"Sure I had," Shayne said, "but right now I've got things to do. I'll call in later to see what the lab finds out."

When he left the Chief's office Mike Shayne drove on downtown for a steak dinner with Tim Rourke and Lucy Hamilton. After that they dropped Rourke off at the *News* offices and Shayne drove Lucy on to her apartment on the North East side of town.

It was still early even then, so he drove on back to his own place in an apartment hotel overlooking the river close to its mouth.

"Here's your mail, Mr. Shayne," the man on the night desk told him. "Also you had a couple of phone calls within the last hour."

He handed Shayne two folded sheets of paper on which he had recorded the calls.

The one on top said simply: "Call Mr. Morgan," and gave the unlisted number of the office in the One-Eighty-Club.

The second was a bit longer and bore no name.

"Tell Mr. Shayne to be at the summer house near the sea wall on the Wilding estate

tonight at eleven o'clock, and I'll meet him and give him the proof he wants."

"That one wouldn't give any name," the desk clerk said. "I can't be sure because the voice was faint and there was a plane going over this building at the time, but it sounded like a woman's voice to me, if that's any help."

"It could be," Shayne said, and went on up to his apartment.

The phone was ringing when he opened the door. When he picked up the instrument he recognized Reddo Morgan's voice.

"Where have you been?" the gambler demanded. "I thought you was supposed to keep in touch with me."

"I got your message a minute ago," Shayne said. "I was going to call you. I've been eating dinner."

"Dinner can wait," Reddo said. "Look here, Shayne, some punk phoned this place a while ago about the Wilding thing and left a message for me."

"You're to be at the Wilding place at eleven tonight," Shayne said. "Is that it?"

"How did you know? Only it ain't eleven. It's ten forty-five. By the sea wall."

"Don't go."

"Don't give me orders, Shayne. I'm going. Only some

of my boys will be along for the fun. I want you there too. By the time we get through with this joker we'll know who scragged the old boy for sure."

"Hold on," Shayne said. "You aren't going. I got the same message, and I'm going to keep the date. You barge in there with an army of those torpedoes of yours and you'll spoil the whole thing. I don't tell you how to run your poker tables, Reddo. So don't tell me how to do my job."

"And I'm not working for you," Reddo yelled into the phone. "You're the one is supposed to be working for me. So you do it my way."

"Not when mine is better," Shayne said.

"At least I put a guard on Karen."

"You do nothing but what I tell you," Shayne said. "That is stay at your club. You and your boys. You put a man to guard Karen, and suppose nobody shows at eleven. How do I know it wasn't Karen called?"

"Oh."

"You hired me," Shayne said. "Let me do the job."

XI

IT WAS characteristic of Mike Shayne that he stretched out on his bed and even slept for about half an hour after

hanging up the receiver on Reddo Morgan. When he woke it was about nine o'clock and he heated a pot of very black, very strong coffee and drank two cups liberally laced with some of his best French brandy.

After that he put on a clean shirt and put his big Colt's forty-five automatic in its belt holster high up back of his right hip. In spite of the heat he twisted a silk scarf around his neck instead of a tie. It would stop another blow gun dart. He found a pair of leather driving gloves and put them in his pocket.

Mike Shayne was ready for whatever action the rest of the night might bring.

Shayne had been told to be at the summer house on the Wilding estate at eleven o'clock, but the time set for Reddo Morgan had been ten forty-five. Evidently the mystery caller wanted to deal with one man at a time.

Mike Shayne thought he knew why.

He himself wanted to get there before the caller showed up. Shayne left his apartment in plenty of time, but he hadn't counted on the traffic. It was heavier than usual on the Boulevard and at one point he had to slow to a crawl punctuated by long stops. There'd been a three-car

fender-bender at the 36th St. intersection, where the expressway went over.

Between one thing and another it was after ten-thirty before he got across 54th Street and could swing into the Morningside Park area.

Then he had to park his car at least two blocks away from the Wilding place and walk on in. He couldn't run the risk of being heard or seen arriving.

He got off the street entirely at the Wilder grounds and used the cover of ornamental foliage plantings and the detached rear garage to work his way around behind the house. There were lights burning downstairs in the big house and in Karen's second floor suite.

Shayne could see a couple of servants through the kitchen windows. They were putting around. He could see nothing unusual.

The summer house, actually a roofed pagoda over a circle of columns, was at least a hundred yards from the big house and right at the edge of the low sea wall fronting on the Bay. Between it and the house was a huge clump of bamboo and some other plantings.

Mike Shayne used this as cover. He had to exercise extreme caution. The mystery caller might have had the same idea and Shayne didn't want to

stumble on him there in the dark, particularly not if he had more poison darts.

He was moving very slowly when he heard somebody coming from over near the rear gate to the estate. It was a man and he was walking fast. When he was briefly silhouetted against the light reflected off the water, Shayne could see that he carried a gun in one hand.

The man got right up to the summer house, looked inside, and then whipped up his gun and started firing at something he saw there.

He never heard the puff of air as the blow gun was fired from a clump of croton and hibiscus behind him, may never even have felt the sting of the dart in his neck. He slapped at his neck and then screamed and dropped the gun. He turned to run towards where Shayne was hiding, but could make only two or three steps. Then he went down, screamed once more, and died.

Mike Shayne dropped to his knees in the shelter of the heavy underbrush. He figured he was fairly safe there from any attack with a blow gun. Any leaf or twig would hold or divert the little dart.

He pulled his own big forty-five and fired a single shot into the brush on the other side



of the summer house. Of course he couldn't see a target. As a matter of fact he deliberately fired high. The shot was meant to scare off the killer rather than hit him.

It worked.

There was a rustling in the brush and then the sound of bushes disturbed and running feet. Whoever it was kept out of sight in the landscaping shrubs all the way to the back boundary of the estate.

There was a scrambling there, as he or she got over the low coral rock wall that bounded the grounds, and then the sound of a car motor starting and tires squealing on the street paving. Shayne got the impression of a small car with a souped up engine. He figured it for his old friend, the little red foreign sports job. All this took only a couple of minutes.

Shayne's big Colt's forty-five had boomed like a cannon in the evening quiet of this plush neighborhood. More lights flashed on over at the big house. He could see servants clustered by the kitchen door.

Then a slim figure came running out and down the path to the sea wall. It was Karen Wilding.

Mike Shayne stepped out of the cover of the bushes and hailed her. "Stay back. There's a man hurt here, maybe killed. Have somebody call the police."

She paused and then came on again, more slowly this time.

"Is that you, Mike? It's all right. I've got a strong stomach. Besides this is my property. I have a right to know what goes on here."

Mike Shayne pulled out his pocket flash and went ahead of her to where the man's contorted body sprawled on the grass. The face was horribly contorted with pain and fear, already turning purple from the poison. The little feathered dart stuck in the cheek as Shayne had expected.

It was Burkey O'Bannion.

"Oh my God," Karen Wilding gasped. Then: "That's the way Seymour looked. Oh my God, Mike!"

"He must have wanted to get us all," Shayne said to himself.

"Everybody called for a few minutes apart. A heap of bodies at the end."

Karen said: "Mike—that thing in his face."

"That's what killed him."

"You know I didn't kill him, Mike. You do, don't you? You know that?" She was distraught.

"I know it," Shayne said. "I was here. Whoever did it ran out the back. You came from the house."

"Thank God," she said fervently. "Mike, I think I was going to be framed for this."

"I'm sure you were, Karen," he said. "I wish there was some way I could prove it."

She stood for a moment, her face averted from the corpse at her feet, before seeming to come to a conclusion.

"Come on Mike. I think I can prove it for you. There's something I found tonight. Come on."

She led him back to the house in silence and up to her second floor suite of rooms. From the back of her closet she pulled a brown paper sack of the kind that supermarkets pack their groceries in. It was heavy. She gave it to Shayne.

"I found this today. It was hidden, stuffed in back of the closet. I didn't understand. I was scared."

Mike Shayne cleared a space

on the glass top of her dressing table and turned out the contents of the sack. It held a tin pea shooter, three of the awful little darts, and the dead bodies of two of the big *Bufo Marinur* toads. The toads had been beaten before they died and had defended themselves in the only way they knew by exuding big white, gummy drops of poison from the head and back.

"What does it mean, Mike?"

"Simple enough," Shayne said. "This is meant to be evidence to convict you of murder. O'Bannion and Morgan and I were going to be killed with this poison on your grounds. The police would search every inch of your house after that. They'd find this in your closet."

"My God," she gasped. "How awful! But who, Mike? Who?"

"The same one who killed Seymour," Shayne said. "He'd get rid of you and your lovers and me, the man who might track him down. He must have killed Seymour with the same poison. Probably smeared on the two sharp tines of a carving set fork and jabbed into the leg. The old man died before he could get help. If the snake story had been believed, the killer would have nothing to fear."

"But it didn't," she said.

"I don't think the killer was sorry," Shayne said. "He would have marked you for death in time anyway. Your husband was killed mostly because of you anyway."

"Who?" she said. "Who?"

"Charlie Wilding, of course," Shayne said. "It had to be Charlie."

"I don't believe it. That boy? Why?"

"Partly because he must be insane," Mike Shayne said. "Everybody else around here seemed to have a motive. You and Elsie and Burkey and Reddo, you all had a motive. Only none of those motives was good enough for a killing. In the final analysis, all any of you had to do was wait. You were logical people and that was the logical thing to do."

"I started looking for an illogical killer with an illogical motive. Somebody crazy enough to think up that snake business and be clever enough to fake it with toad poison. To think up a blow gun and make darts."

"The whole thing showed the working of a demented mind, or an adolescent driven wild by hate. It was the sort of thing the comic book writers use."

"That meant Charlie. He hated his father because he had

rejected Charlie's mother for you. He hated you for that and for betraying old Seymour with Reddo and Burkey. Hate. That's a motive that doesn't have to be logical.

"He had access to the house at all times. He killed his father and tried to kill me.

"It was Charlie all right."

"That's very clever of you, Mr. Shayne," said the voice from the doorway into the hall.

It was Charlie Wilding. He had the twin to the pea shooter on the dressing table held up close to his lips and his mouth was twisted into a crazy smile. Shayne knew there was another dart in that tube.

"I knew from the first I'd have to kill you, Mr. Shayne," Charlie said. "I followed you in my sports car when you first talked to Karen. I knew you'd find me out. I meant to kill you outside tonight, but you got here too early. You saw me kill her lover. I drove away, but I came back. You didn't expect that, did you?"

"No," Shayne said. "I didn't expect that." He was wondering if he could get his gun out before the boy shot him with that dart, but he knew he couldn't.

Charlie laughed. "I got the best of the great Mike Shayne. too bad the world won't ever know."

"Are you going to kill us both?" Karen asked.

"Not you, sweet Karen," he said. "Not you, my darling stepmother who caused all this misery when you seduced my father. I'm going to kill Shayne and leave you alive with the evidence I already planted. The servants have called the cops to come get the man on the lawn. They'll find you and know you killed Michael Shayne. I win after all."

Charlie Wilding laughed.

"Oh no," Karen said and took a step towards the boy.

He put the tube to his mouth.

"Don't be stupid," she said ignoring the threat. "You can't kill me without spoiling the whole plan. If I'm not framed as the killer they keep looking till they find you."

It made him hesitate. When she came on he tried to fend her off with his left hand and arm.

Mike Shayne came across the floor with the speed and controlled ferocity of a leaping jungle cat. One big hand slapped the deadly tube out of Charlie's hand. The other took the boy in an iron grip.

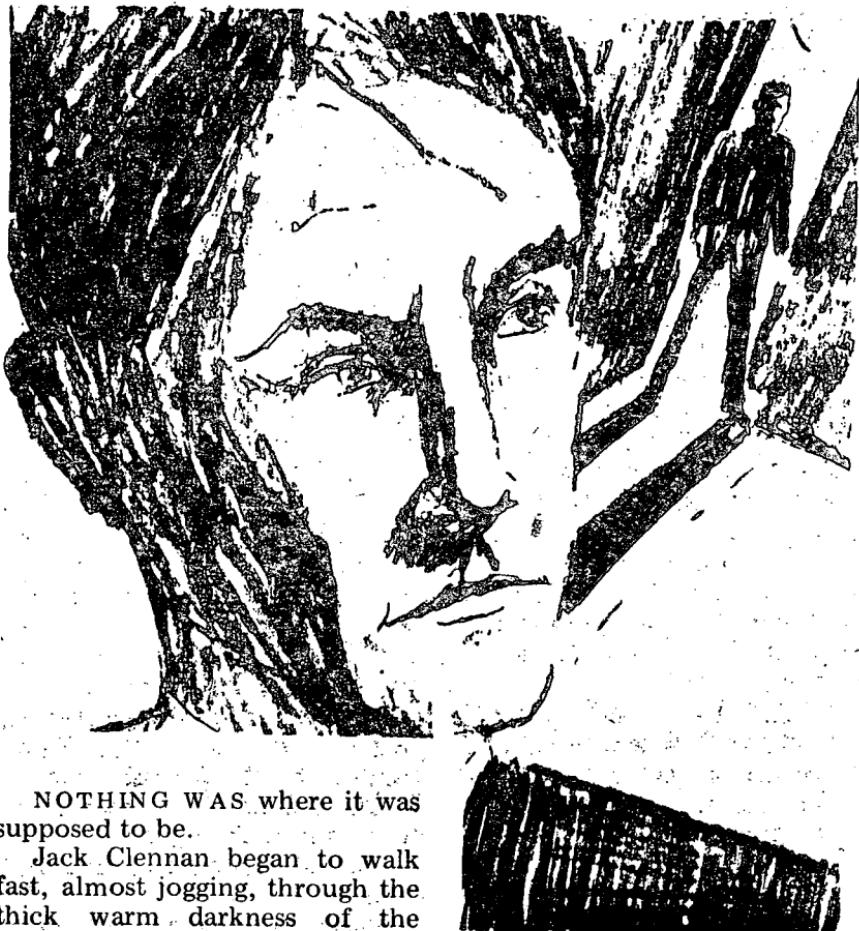
"It's all over now, Charlie," he said.

Karen Wilding fainted dead away on the deep piled carpet of her dressing room.

DOWN THERE

I was the second best kill-for-pay man in the business. The only trouble was—the man across the table from me was the best!

by RON GOULART



NOTHING WAS where it was supposed to be.

Jack Clennan began to walk fast, almost jogging, through the thick warm darkness of the

Mexican town, down narrow dusty side streets that were sliced by smoky yellow light slanting out of open adobe doorways: He was a tall man, lean, still three years from forty. His summer suit was an expensive one.

Clennan reached under his coat, touched his shoulder holster. Breathing evenly through his slightly open mouth, he slowed. He realized where he had to go. Slackening his pace, Clennan turned on to the Calle Ciguena. The new little garage had better still be there.

Last week, up in Los Angeles, he had been much surer of things.

There had been a mild quake that morning, nothing like the big one of a few months before. The floor of his office seemed to give a gentle hop, the mat drapes flapped hard once.

The man on the other end of the phone said, "My God! It's starting all over again."

Clennan was sitting with his hands locked behind his head, the desk phone receiver held in the crook of his neck. Across Hollywood Boulevard three blonde starlets were holding on to each other in front of a delicatessen, frightened by the earth tremor.

"Tourists," Clennan said.

"What?"

"Only tourists and transplants are afraid of quakes."

Carlos Beck said, "You know what damage the last big one did. It hurt my studio, the people I work for. Come on, be realistic."

"\$50,000," repeated Clennan. "You bastard," said Beck. "Suppose I'm recording this?"

"That's illegal. They'd take your phone out. Then you won't be able to set up your new TV series for next year."

"You, they'd take your license away."

"Look, Beck, I'll give you one week more. If I don't have the \$50,000 by—" Clennan stretched out a lean long-fingered hand toward his desk calendar—"by Friday, July 23, I'll make it all public."

"I can't come up with anything like \$50,000, Clennan. You of all people ought to know what my first wife's doing to me."

"If you don't want anybody to find out what you've been doing to those under-age girls, Beck, you gather together \$50,000."

"How about \$5000 now and the rest in six months?"

Clennan laughed. "I'm not offering you an option on the photos, Beck."

"I don't know why I ever came to you."

"Because you wanted a private detective who'd get something on you second wife," Clennan told him. "I did that for

you. While I was looking around I happened to find out a few things about your other interests. I took pictures."

Someone came into his empty outer reception room.

"How about \$10,000 now?"

"I've got to get back to work, Beck. Don't call me any more," said Clennan. "Unless you have the dough." He hung up, walked to the door.

A big wide blond man smiled at him in the doorway. "Son of a gun," he said, laughing and holding out his hand. "I knew you'd be in shape, Jake. Just like five years ago."

"Bob Pauley," grinned Clennan, shaking hands. "I haven't seen you since—"

"1966." Pauley placed both enormous hands on his stomach. "I didn't have all this then. Took a lot of *cerveza* to build it." "Yeah, you were still with the LA County sheriff's office in 1966."

"You were still with the LAPD and—" Pauley stopped.

"And married to Elaine."

"That was too bad, Jake."

"Expensive anyway." He grinned at the big man. "You need a detective, Bob?"

"Not me exactly."

"You sound like all my clients. Come on in."

Pauley put an arm around Clennan as they crossed the office. "I feel bad about us not

seeing each other for so long, Jake. We were good buddies, back in college and after. I guess when you and—"

"And Elaine got divorced," said Clennan. "You still married?"

"Not for two years. But it wasn't any big smashup. Everyone isn't as flamboyant as—" The big man caught himself again, his wide face reddening.

Clennan shook his head, grinned. "You're the only guy I've ever met who blushed. Sit down." He went behind his desk.

"Honestly, Jake," said Pauley, still standing, "I'm doing a favor for someone. The job shouldn't take more than a few days. Is \$1000 enough for a fee?"

"Might be. What do I have to do during those few days?"

Pauley sat, unbuttoned his rumpled sport coat. "Go to Mexico."

"Mexico?"

"You'd only have to go down there for a few days," explained Pauley. "Not that far, only about fifty miles over the border. Middle sized town named San Garabato. You can drive in a few hours. I've done it in that."

"What have you been up to in Mexico?"

"I forgot to tell you," said Pauley, blushing slightly again. "A while after I quit the deputy sheriff work I hooked up with an international outfit called Med-

icamento Sud. Drug Company with its main office in Mexico City. I run their LA office and commute to Mexico quite a lot. I like it. Pays better than cop work, too."

"Most things do. If you don't have a problem, who does?"

Pauley stuck one of his big hands into his side coat pocket, took out a photo. "This girl's father. He's a man named Andrew Quillan. Maybe you've heard of him."

"No." The enlarged snapshot showed a tall blonde girl in her mid twenties, quietly pretty. She was smiling, a little shyly, leaning against a whitewashed wall. Flat dry yellow ground showed off beyond the wall. "Who's Quillan?"

"Big in pharmaceuticals in this country. Lives out in Pomona," explained Pauley. "He's a friend of mine and a very good friend of some of our people in Mexico. In fact, it was one of our Médicamento Sud consultants living right in San Garabato who spotted the girl there. His name is Dr. Altez. You'll talk to him."

"What does your drugstore friend Quillan want?"

"Right now he wants to know how his daughter's getting along."

"Your mutual friend Alteza could tell him that."

Pauley's face colored. "Well,

Jake, Quinlan is fairly certain his daughter has taken some valuable stuff from the family home. Apparently she wants to write, or thinks she does. She's renting a little house down there. The photo was taken in front of the place."

Clennan fanned the air with the photo three times. "She allowed Dr. Alteza to snap a few candid shots to send home?"

"No, he got the pic from a friend of hers," said Pauley: "The basic situation is this, Jake. The girl—did I tell you her first name is Chana? An odd one, huh?—Chana Quillan has some money of her own. So she quit her job, took off. She's been in Mexico for six or seven months. Quillan didn't know exactly where until just recently."

"What did she swipe from him?"

"Quillan thinks she took some jewelry. Some of his late wife's jewelry he'd kept mostly for sentimental reasons." Reaching into another lumpy pocket, Pauley produced a wrinkled yellow sheet. "This is a list of the items."

Clennan scanned the list, nodded. "Sentiment and about \$150,000."

"I guess this is what you'd call a delicate situation. Not something for the police, either here or down there," said the big man. "When Quillan told me he



needed a private operative who was both tough and discreet, I thought of you. I'd heard you'd become a private investigator, a damn good one." He paused, chuckling. "Besides which I guess I wanted an excuse for us to get together again. I've missed us getting together."

"Those things happen. All of a sudden somebody isn't in your life anymore." Clennan put both palms flat on his desk, looking across at his old friend. "What does Quillan want done?"

Pauley glanced down at the gold rug. "Can you find out whether the girl has the jewels with her? You might be able to—to retrieve them." He looked up. "I know when you were a cop you were always pretty clean. Still—well, can you sort of repossess the stuff?"

"Provided she has it, yes."

"I can pay you the whole thousand now." Pauley reached in under his coat and got out a

thick weathered brown wallet. He fished out the money, in \$100 bills, held it tentatively toward Clennan. "You'll accept the case, Jake?"

"Yeah, okay. As it happens I have a free week." He took the money. "I'll write you a receipt."

"Not necessary."

Rising, Clennan walked to his wall safe. "I'll deposit the money this afternoon, on my way out of town." As he placed the cash deep in the metallic shadows of the safe he tapped once at the envelope which held the Carlos Beck photos and negatives. "I might as well start for Mexico today."

"I'll give you the names of a couple of people to check with in San Garabato. Besides Dr. Alteza, you ought to contact a guy named Fernandez. He's affiliated with one of Quillan's companies." He carefully printed the two names and addresses on a memo page. "Fernandez' outfit is just opening a small branch office in San Garabato. What you do is contact this Janeiro Fernandez when you have anything to report. Quillan says he'll fix it with Fernandez to put you straight through to me in Los Angeles by phone, wherever I am."

"It'll save on expenses. So long as Fernandez doesn't listen."

"I'm told he's a good man. Say—got time for lunch?"

"Sure."

"Good. I didn't notice any secretary out there. Who do you sign in and out with?"

"Answering service. I don't believe in secretaries."

"You ought to see mine, though," said Pauley. "Where would you like to eat?"

"Up to you," said Clennan. "Just so it isn't a Mexican place."

Clennan met with Dr. Alteza the morning after he'd arrived in San Garabato. He'd gotten into the moderate sized Mexican town late the night before, checked into the hotel Pauley'd suggested. The *Cosmopolita*, a three story stucco and tile building. His car he'd parked two blocks over from the hotel in a new-looking small private garage he picked out for himself.

Dr. Alteza lived in a large white house a mile beyond the town. The place stood in the center of five flat acres, bordered by a five foot high adobe wall. Low gnarled trees grew around the house, wild scrubby grass.

Clennan parked in the shade of one of the healthier trees, got out. When he'd called the doctor from his hotel the phone had been out of service. Pauley had assured him the doctor could usually be found at home, so Clennan had driven here.

"Forgive me," said a soft tired voice.

In a side doorway of the big white house stood a thin dark man of fifty. "Dr. Alteza? I'm Jake Clennan."

"Yes, I anticipated your arrival," said the doctor. "Senor Pauley speaks highly of you."

"He's a friend."

The thin man made a beckoning motion, "Please come in. Forgive my informality in inviting you to enter by way of the kitchen. You see, the couple who act as my servants were called away last night by a sudden illness in the family. I am quite alone today and thus forced to prepare my own coffee."

The kitchen was vast. On the stove an old fashioned enameled coffee pot was perking. "I tried to phone you this morning," said Clennan.

"The telephone service here is not what it is in your country. It's fortunate I'm no longer in active practice. Would you care for a cup of coffee?" After pouring two cups, the white-suited Alteza led Clennan further into the house. In a long low living room he nodded the detective into a heavy sofa, seated himself on a solid wood chair. "I'm glad someone of your ability is here to help my friend Quillan."

Clennan sipped his strong

coffee, set the cup on the heavy wood table in front of the sofa. "Bob Pauley indicated you could tell me where Chana Quillan is living. Something about her life here."

The thin doctor said, "It saddened me when Andrew Quillan told me his daughter had left home to come and hide in my country. I am happy I have been able to locate her."

"Exactly how," asked Clennan, "did you do that?"

"Do you smoke, señor? No. Would you, *por favor*, hand me a cigarette from the box before you. *Gracias.*" After Clennan had given him a cigarette from the silver box the doctor continued. "I located Chana by purest chance, señor. I noticed her in the plaza one day three weeks ago. I followed her, learned she is living in a small rented house on Calle Pulguera. I made careful inquiries, then communicated with my friend Andrew Quillan."

Clennan asked, "You think she's got the jewels with her?"

Dr. Alteza kept his cup in front of his mouth several long seconds. "Yes, it seems quite possible. I learned from certain real estate people there is a small safe in her house."

"How'd you get the photo of her?"

"It was obtained from a young artist she knows, a painter named Pike. He sometimes dines

with the girl at a restaurant known as Zorro Rojo."

"What's the girl doing down here?"

"Writing. I've heard nothing negative about her."

Clennan spent another fifteen minutes questioning the doctor, then rose to leave. "Thanks for your help, Dr. Alteza."

"It is nothing," said the doctor, guiding him to the heavy oak front door. "I have every hope my telephone will be working soon. Day or night, should you need any assistance, please call me."

Outside it had grown hot and yellow.

Two days later Clennan looked up Janeiro Fernandez. It was a hazy afternoon and the plump young Fernandez was alone in the small office trying to get the air conditioner to function. "I've been expecting you. You had no trouble locating me?"

"No, I saw the sign on the door."

"My own work," smiled Fernandez. "We were supposed to have a man in two good weeks ago to paint my name on the door and to date he has not appeared. In desperation I made a temporary sign. You wish to talk to Señor Pauley?"

"Yes."

"Please go back to my private office—excuse the piled up

boxes—and I'll get him for you."

"Okay, fine." Clennan went into the side office, closed the door, took a seat behind the grey metal desk. Paper cartons of file folders were stacked all around. He lifted out a folder. The label read *Corbettas*.

"Neckties?" said Clennan. He pulled out another file. This one was labeled, in Spanish, dress shirts. The phone rang. "Hello."

"Hi, old buddy," said Pauley. "How are things South of the border?"

"I've made contact with the girl."

"You've actually talked to her?"

"Had lunch with her yesterday. Tonight we're going to dinner."

Pauley laughed. "That's the old Clennan I know."

"I'm posing as a tourist, a dissatisfied aerospace exec from up in Glendale," said Clennan. "I met her in a restaurant she likes."

"What sort of girl is she?"

"Not quite as shy and innocent as she looks in the picture."

"Meaning?"

"I'm not quite sure yet, Bob. I've been looking around, talking to people, bribing a few. I don't quite get the impression of a virginal girl poet."

"I don't think Quillan is interested in her virtue at this

point," said his friend. "Wait though! You mean she's mixed up in something?"

"She may have friends who are. Some kind of smuggling deal."

"Huh," said Pauley. "Well, look, Jake, Quillan doesn't want her getting in trouble. But the most important thing is still the jewels. Does she have them?"

"I haven't been inside her house yet, but after dinner tonight she's invited me over for a drink," said Clennan. "I'll take a look around then. Alteza says there's a safe on the premises."

"Then that's where she must have the stuff."

"Maybe. Things don't always turn out that obvious."

"When can you get a look at the safe, inside it?"

"I doubt I can work that tonight. Probably this Wednesday. Chana tells me she's driving south to look at some ruins, going with a couple of her shady friends. She'll be gone most of Wednesday and Thursday. So Wednesday night I'll visit the place, late."

"You're doing fine, old buddy," said Pauley. "Keep it up."

Outside Fernandez was still working on the air conditioner. "All goes well, señor?"

"Thanks, yes. I didn't know your drug company was in haberdashery."

Fernandez blinked, frowned, then smiled. "Oh, si, those boxes. The former tenant was to have moved them over a week ago. I am too affable to merely throw them away."

"Affability can be a handicap," said Clennan, and left.

Pike was large and bearded. He aimed the camera at them, clicked it.

"You planning to do a painting of Chana and me?" Clennan asked the young artist.

"I only work on symbolic landscapes at the moment," replied the painter, clicking off two more shots. "I have a feeling, though, I'm about to enter a new phase. Well, I'll leave you two." He wandered away to his table across the big restaurant.

"We should have gone elsewhere," said Chana Quillan.

"I thought he only ate at the Red Fox."

"No, this is another of his haunts. Even so, I'd better not discourage him. Pretty soon you'll be back snug in Glendale and poor Pike will start looking good again."

"You think you're about to enter a Pike phase?"

"Be serious a minute, Jake."

"I am serious. I've got quite a bit more time to stay down here. And I'll be coming back again."

The slender girl smiled at him. With one hand she was breaking

off the streamers of wax hanging down the side of the candle bottle. "I guess you're being honest." She held a fragment of wax to the flame, watched it melt. "Maybe I ought to be the same..."

"What?"

She let go the flaming wax. "Nothing, Jake. Nothing now. Some other time maybe." Chana took a deep breath. "That was a pleasant dinner. Want to take me up on the invitation to pay a house call?"

"Yes, I'd like to," Clennan said to the girl.

The next time he saw her she was dead.

After ten on Wednesday night Clennan had walked from the Cosmopolita Hotel across town to the Calle Pulguera. Chana's house was stuck at the end of a dusty cul de sac. There were no lights on in the small house, none in the larger house next to it.

Clennan had turned off from the street, worked his way along the alley between the two houses. Halfway to the rear he halted. He had the notion someone was watching him from behind the shuttered windows of the big house. He took a quick look, saw nothing and moved on.

Behind Chana's low house there was a small yard with a high stucco wall around it, a lopsided bird bath in its center.

Clennan crossed the dark

yard, listening. No sound came. He moved to the kitchen window he'd decided on using when he'd been in the girl's house two nights before. He'd made sure then it was unlocked. Carefully he nudged at the frame. The window rose and he pulled himself carefully into the silent house.

The tiny kitchen smelled of corn meal and stale wine. Clennan stood next to the round raw wood table, took in all the sounds around him. He was certain the girl wasn't here. He'd been watching the house that morning and he'd seen her come out. She'd been picked up by two people, a young shaggy headed guy and a fat black girl, in a ten-year-old car. Wherever she'd gone, ruins or otherwise, he knew she was planning to be away two days.

The bedroom was next to the kitchen. He hadn't been able to spot a safe the other night, but according to Dr. Alteza, this is where one was supposed to be. Clennan took his pencil flash out, pushed the bedroom door open. He spent ten minutes in the shadowy room, searching in the closet, under the bed and rugs, behind the two explosive Pike landscape paintings on the wall. There was no safe. He'd have to search the whole house.

Then he saw Chana in the living room. She was lying flat on

her back in the exact center of a rectangular Indian rug, arms and legs wide.

The flashlight showed him she had two bullet holes in the chest and was a good hour dead. He felt her pulse anyway, then let her dead hand drop. She had something clutched in the hand. Clennan was about to pry it out when someone knocked on the front door.

"Senorita Quillan, are you at home? This is Mrs. Domingues next door. I thought I saw someone prowling."

Clennan spun, ran. Leaving the room he brushed against a low coffee table, knocking a silver cigarette box to the floor. He ran to the kitchen, out into the backyard and the warm heavy darkness. He made a grabbing leap and caught the top of the stucco wall surrounding the yard. He could hear Mrs. Domingues pounding on the door even when he reached the next block.

Five blocks from there he stepped casually into a cantina and, after having a beer, went back to the phones. He called Dr. Alteza's number and was told the phone was no longer in service. He talked to the operator in Spanish. "Please, it's very important that I reach Dr. Alteza." He gave her the full name and address. "Can you tell me what's wrong with his phone?"

listing for any Dr.

Clennan touched his shoulder holster when he hit the street. The night stayed hot and sticky and from somewhere unseen came guitar music. Not Mexican guitar, but loud amplified electric.

He headed down a side street, walking fast. In a few minutes he was at Fernandez' building. Though the giant office building was nearly dark the lobby doors were still open.

Clennan went up the stairs two at a time. There was a chance Fernandez might be there, or someone to put him in contact with Pauley up in LA. If not he'd have to risk a direct long distance call to his friend from a booth.

Fernandez' office was there, but it was no longer his. A newly painted sign on the glass, the chalk marks still showing around the black lettering, announced: *Gomez—Discounting Clothing. Wholesale Only.*

He took his hand off the doorknob and turned away.

Clennan stood in shadows across the street from the garage a long while. After he'd panicked, run, he calmed down. The thing to do was get his car and head out of town. Out of San Garabato, out of Mexico. Back in



Los Angeles he might be able to find out why old Quillan had given Bob Pauley a fake story. There was nothing to connect him with the dead girl. He didn't even have to go back to his hotel since there was only one small suitcase there.

He'd watched the garage long enough to decide it was safe. The place had two levels. A repair shop and business office on the ground floor and, up a winding ramp, the area where a dozen cars could be parked.

A bare bulb burned in the office, but there was no sign of the attendant. Getting out his keys, Clennan ran up the ramp.

There were only three cars up

there in the dark shadowy room. His car was nearest the ramp. Clennan started for it, then stopped.

The door on the driver's side swung open. "Get in, old buddy."

Clennan went closer to his car, watching the .38 revolver in Bob Pauley's hand. "You're not where you're supposed to be either."

"I've been in town all the time," said Pauley. "Climb on inside here, Jake. Sit. Yeah, that's how Fernandez could get me so easy. I'm staying in a place out near Dr. Alteza."

"The non-existent Alteza." Clennan sat in his car behind the wheel.

"A game?" he asked the big blond man next to him.

"What's been happening here? No, it's all been worked out to a purpose."

"Who's the girl?"

"She's really Chana Quillan," said Pauley. "Only there's no Andrew Quillan. She's been working for some people I know. I really am with Medicamento Sud, Jake; but I make most of my money from a different area of the drug business. Chana has been acting as a sort of courier. Delivering things, making an occasional trip over to Europe to deliver money to somebody. The thing was, she got too anxious after profit and that angered

people. So it was decided to kill her."

Pauley reached into one of his baggy pockets and took out another pistol, resting it on the seat between his thick legs. "With this very gun, a .32."

"Why bring me in?"

"Well, we had this girl to kill and we had to get rid of you, had to get you out of LA, too. So we decided to mix the two jobs together."

"Who's buying me out of the way?"

"Guy name of Carlos Beck, in the mass media field in Los Angeles," explained Pauley. "He paid some people \$5000 to get rid of you, Jake."

"What about the photos?"

"They were taken out of your safe the day you got down here," said Pauley. "You really ought to have a partner or a secretary. To look after things while you're out of town."

"\$5000," said Clennan.

"Cheaper than the \$50,000 you wanted from Beck."

"And I'm supposed to have killed the girl?"

"Yes, a lover's quarrel. The old lady next door's been primed to give the authorities a story. Did you look around the place, the room she was in?"

"Didn't have time."

"Good. That means I won't have as much to go back and arrange," said Pauley. "We

"I have no listing for any Dr. Alteza."

"None?"

"No, señor."

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"Didn't have time."

"Good. That means I won't have as much to go back and arrange," said Pauley. "We

planted, to be on the safe side, some of the things you handled out at your interview with Alteza. Even the San Garabato police are impressed by fingerprints. Oh, and in her hand there's a photo of you two, one taken the other night by that Pike Guy."

"Not much of a frame, Bob," said Clennan, watching the shadows at the far end of the garage. He sensed some motion there. "Because I'll talk. And I work with good lawyers."

"Sure, if you were alive," said Pauley. "The thing is, you're going to kill yourself, out of remorse over your crime of passion. You'll use the same gun you used on Chana. A gun you

apparently bought under your own name in LA last week. It should be very convincing, Jake. Things like this have always worked for us before."

Pauley reached out suddenly with his free hand and grabbed Clennan's gun out of his shoulder holster. "We better get going, old buddy."

Clennan sat back, breathing slowly in the heavy dark. Finally he said, "So you set me up, Bob? Ten years ago you couldn't have done that."

"Ten years ago you wouldn't have been a blackmailer," Pauley said. "Everybody changes." He stepped out of the car and called to the men who had been standing in the shadows.

Something Extraordinary—Coming Next Month:

DETECTIVES BY GASLIGHT

Beginning with the next issue we are presenting a rare and special mystery-treat, starring the famous detectives of yesteryear. Each story presents a contemporary of Sherlock Holmes. Selected and edited by SAM MOSKOWITZ, the esteemed anthologist, we nostalgically recall, exclusively for you, detectives who lived nigh on a century ago. They led the intrepid way for all the other sleuths that followed.

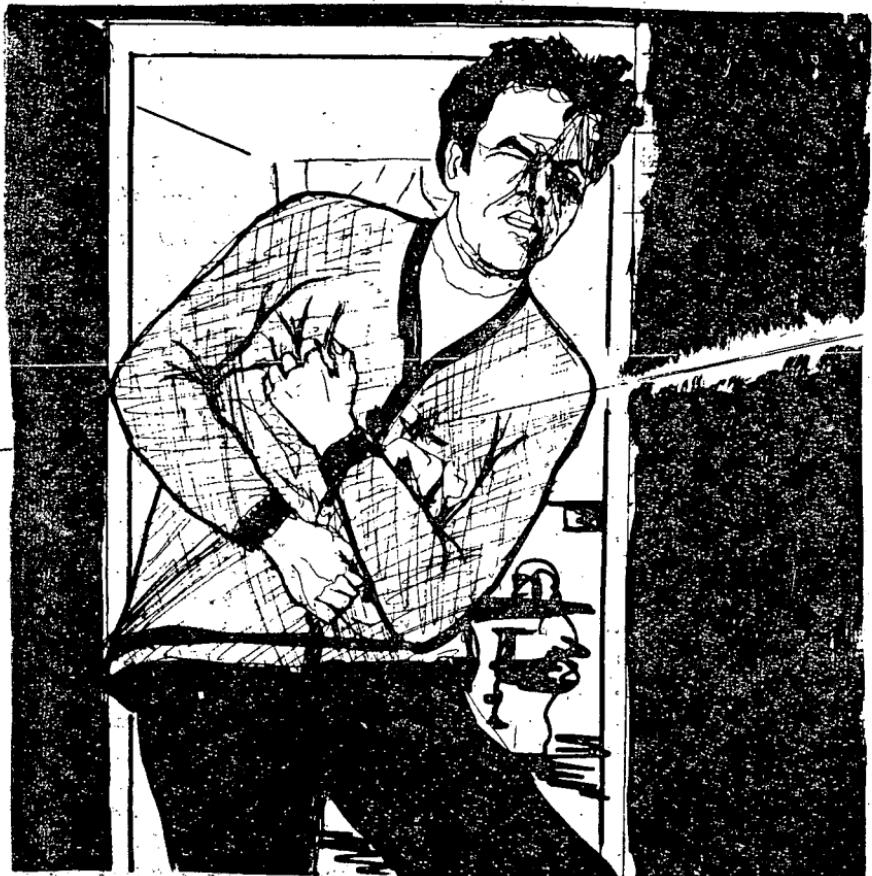
THE LENTON CROFT ROBBERIES

a MARTIN HEWITT classic

by ARTHUR MORRISON

THE SPECIALISTS

by JERRY JACOBSON



The Price of Victory -- Was it Death?



Forty thousand people would watch him this day, the place kicker who never missed. Of them one would have murder in his heart—and a long range target gun in his hand...

DETECTIVE Lieutenant Amory Tige looked at the inert left hand hanging high on his steering wheel like a dead claw wrapped in a gray athletic bandage and willed it to work. Each time he made a turn he tried to get it to work in concert with his good right one. And each time the limp hand rebelled, shooting a message of pain up his arm that it wasn't ready to go back to work.

There was no earthly reason

for him to be chasing to the scene of a murder this night. Two good city detectives were on it and if it grew complicated, Chief Drapper wouldn't hesitate to assign more.

But Tige didn't need reasons. Murder revulsed him, went against his grain like a file being drawn across wood in the wrong direction. It kept him awake nights, drove his appetite into hiding and pushed every other thought from his mind.

It was now 12.52 A.M., roughly three hours since Milos Peskova had been shot to death as he stood spotlighted in the porch light of a small duplex apartment on South Campus Way.

It was Coach Carl Baumann who had informed Tige of the killing. They were frequent fishing companions and Tige had always been a receptive ear and a sympathetic mind to the tensions, pressures and troubles of a major, small college football coach whose Gresham-Moore College teams had won six conference titles in nine years. Coach Baumann knew strangers could handle the case, but his grief was too strong to keep back his urge to call his friend.

According to Baumann, Milos Peskova had shared the duplex apartment with Marty Tolland, the other half of the Gresham-Moore Loggers' field-goal-kicking punch. At a little after ten o'clock in the evening, Peskova had answered the front doorbell.

Five seconds after he'd pulled open the door the quiet night was shattered with the explosion of a single rifle shot. The bullet struck Peskova on his dark green letterman's sweater, just above the white, interlocking letters G-M. The bullet found his heart beneath

the wool sweater, killing him instantly.

Marty Tolland bolted to the door but did not venture out onto the stoop. Instead, he closed the door immediately and called the police and then Baumann, who immediately called Lieutenant Tige.

"Of course I'm interested, Carl," Tige had told Baumann when he called. "But what good is a detective who's on sick-days with tendonitis?"

"Since when do detectives think with their left wrists? Look, Tige, I've got a homecoming game coming up Saturday, a conference title at stake and a dead Czech kicking specialist, shot through the heart in poor light across a boulevard from the distance of at least a football field. Put all that together and you get something that sounds professional and smells like a vatful of ten-week-old smelt. You nose around a little, Amory. You find out where that smell is coming from."

"Nose around? And give Chief Drapper a legitimate opportunity to lop it off?" Tige said, "Not a chance."

"Find Peskova's killer. Say you'll stick your nose into this and I'll wrestle a couple of bench passes for you from Sid Hemmins in the ticket department."

"That's a bribe, Carl."

"Peskova's address was 224 South Campus Way. I suggest you start by waiting a couple hours for the smoke to clear over there and then drop over for a chat with Marty Tolland, his roommate."

"And what makes you think Tolland will be able to tell me any more than he told the detectives on the case?"

"He may not tell you anything new. But then again, you may turn out to be a better listener and looker."

"Two bench passes."

"Have them in the mail to you by tomorrow morning."

Lieutenant Tige could only smile without defense. Coach Carl Baumann knew his price.

II

AMORY TIGE'S wrist and forearm were still throbbing, but he was on North Campus Way now with nothing to negotiate but the gradual arc of boulevard as it swept past campus buildings, dormitories and athletic facilities. Three minutes later, the silent giant of Logger Stadium loomed up.

On six home-game Saturdays the current season, the 45,000-seat arena had been filled to overflowing. The parking lots which surrounded Logger Stadium on three sides,

in three days, would again be jammed with 10,000 cars, campers and station wagons.

In this medium-sized logging community of 85,000 inhabitants, collegiate football had come to burgeon into Gresham-Moore's second biggest industry.

Carl Baumann had caused it, bringing from the East Coast his genius football mind, his ability to attract the kind of players it took to build a small college football power, and his boundless energy and talent for selling the townspeople of Gresham-Moore on the importance of college football both as a discipline-character builder and as an exciting, very marketable produce.

Now, someone was out to tamper with the painstaking architecture that had taken Carl Baumann nine long years to build.

About Baumann's two kicking specialists, Marty Tolland and Milos Peskova, Tige knew only what he'd read in the college's pressbooks and the local newspapers. Tolland was called "The Toe," a three-letter senior whose machinelike place-kicking had erased nearly every major collegiate kicking record in the books. Out of 96 point-after-touchdown attempts, his finely calibrated right foot had erred on only

four. In field goals he was 32-for-39, with a 31.6-yard average per kick. His longest had soared 49 yards from the line of scrimmage and an unbelievable 58 yards from where its holder had set it down.

The record of the now deceased Milos Peskova had not been as dazzling or record-breaking as Tolland's, but he had shown remarkable promise and progress as an eighteen-year-old non-letterman sophomore. Through the nine games of the current season's ten-game schedule, Peskova had been a perfect six-for-six in extra points and a spotless three-for-three in field goals, all hit from over thirty yards out.

The bizarre history of his life had been even more remarkable. In 1942, Peskova's parents were Czech resistance fighters against the Nazis in the small village of Lidice, a few miles northwest of Prague.

When three high-ranking German officers were killed by a resistance grenade hurled into a speeding staff car, Hitler ordered the execution of every inhabitant in the village. Of the five hundred villagers only seventeen survived. Two of those fortunate seventeen were the parents of Milos Peskova. They miraculously escaped the village on foot; traveling by

night they made their way south through Czechoslovakian wilderness across the Czech-Austrian border and eventually found sanctuary in Switzerland.

They came to the United States in 1952 and after much diplomatic and political wrangling, during which time Milos was born, obtained American citizenship and final freedom.

The family settled in Cleveland, Ohio where the senior Peskova went to work as a press forge operator in a steel rolling mill similar to the type of work he'd done in Prague and Ostrava.

Milos Peskova starred as a high school soccer player. When he took an impetuous stab at football in his final high school year and netted as a kicker forty two extra points and ten field goals without a miss, he was besieged by college football scouts.

In the battle for Milos Peskova's valuable foot, it was Carl Baumann and the state of Oregon which won out. The clincher came from Milos' parents themselves who after a tour of the campus and town of Gresham-Moore, proclaimed, "So much green, so many hills and rivers. It is like we remember it from our village of Lidice. Mr. Baumann, if our Milos chooses your school, we will not be disappointed."

Through a rolled down window ushering in the stinging breeze of an early December night, Tige spat out the opening on general principles. The dream of a pain-ridden Czech family was ending prematurely. As he drove, Tige wondered who had drawn the nasty number of calling Cleveland, Ohio.

The house at 224 South Campus Way was on the opposite side of the street and as Tige passed it to swing back north, his eye caught the patrol car parked out on the street and a uniformed patrolman standing guard on the porch of the north half of the duplex.

Tige pulled in behind the patrol car, got out and started into the fifteen-foot walk. He was allowed to get just half-way.

"That's far enough, mister!" came the voice from the porch. "Place your hands on your head and identify yourself!"

Tige did as he was told. "Detective Lieutenant Tige," he said, not recognizing the officer.

"With one hand remove your identification, place it on pavement and then take six paces back."

Tige did as he was instructed. The officer was satisfied and returned Tige's badge to him personally.

"Why the city protection?"



"The deceased roommate requested it, Lieutenant," said the officer. "It's his opinion the killer was after him and not the Peskova kid."

The young patrolman noted Tige's bandaged left hand and wrist, the injured results of his gallant attempts to help move a young lady's piano up a flight of apartment stairs.

"Drug bust in the southend last week. Those hippies fight like unwashed tigers when they're cornered."

III

INSIDE THE neat, book-filled apartment, which was unlocked by the officer from the outside, Tige found Marty Tolland at a study table in a far corner of a small living room. The upper torso which turned to greet Tige was small by football standards. The shoulders were compact, the upper chest adequate, the arms moderately developed. Tige guessed he weighed one hundred seventy pounds soaking wet. Tolland's blonde hair was moderate to short on top and square cut in back.

"Lieutenant Tige, Gresham-Moore Police."

Marty Tolland came across the room. He was slightly shorter than Tige, about five feet nine, but his grip was firm and hard.

"Welcome to the parade, Lieutenant Tige," Tolland said. "You missed your buddies by about two hours."

Tige reached into a suit coat pocket and pulled out a stick of cinnamon. He broke it in two equal pieces and popped one into his mouth. "Well, I got kind of a late start."

"What is that? Cinnamon?"

"Trying to cut back on my smoking," Tige explained. "Candy ruins your teeth. Want some?"

Marty Tolland smiled and shook his head.

"Mind if I take off my topcoat? Wouldn't want to catch a cold when I go back out."

Tolland nodded.

Tige removed his coat and took it with him to a threadbare coach.

When Tolland was seated across from Tige on a second-hand-looking leatherette chair, the detective smiled in approval.

"You know, I been watching you kick Gresham-Moore to victory for three years now and here I am, sitting across from the greatest specialist in collegiate football. The way you kick those thirty-plus jobs is a thing of real beauty, Tolland. I mean that."

Marty Tolland blushed modestly. "Thank you, Lieutenant Tige, but I can't take all the credit. It takes a good line to get off a good kick. And it takes a good center and a good placement man, too."

"Yeah, well I guess it's sort of a science. Just like police work is a science. I hope you don't mind, Mr. Tolland, but I have to ask you a few questions about tonight."

"Please, Lieutenant. Make it Marty."

"Marty."

"Can I get you anything,

Lieutenant? How about a cup of coffee?"

Tige smiled. "Well yes, that would be very nice. Wash it over the cinnamon stick I got in my mouth and give it a cinnamon flavor."

The break gave Tige a chance to order his questions in his mind. When Marty Tolland was back and Tige had his coffee, he began.

"Marty, the patrolman outside told me you requested city protection because you think that bullet was meant for you."

Tolland wiped his lips. "Yes, sir. The way I have it figured, somebody's got a lot of money down on Oregon City Tech Saturday. The spread is about six points in our favor, with both us and O.C.T. 5-0 in the conference. That spread is two field goals, Lieutenant, the two I'm likely to kick if we get inside Tech's thirty-five yard-line. Peskova was a good kicker, but under pressure he's unproven.

"I figure the betting people got a bundle down on Oregon City to win or lose by less than six. To hedge their bet, they tried to get rid of me on that porch tonight, only Peskova answered the door. And in his letter sweater, the killer mistook him for me."

"Well, that certainly is an interesting theory, all right,"

Tige said. "You're saying that by putting you out of action and charging Milos Peskova with the task of doing all the Logger field-goal kicking, the gamblers stand to see the point spread close enough to give them easy money."

Tige sipped at his coffee, thinking. He spotted a letter sweater draped over the back of a chair, its left sleeve stripeless. He pointed to it.

"Is that Milos Peskova's letter sweater?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"The one he wore tonight on the porch?"

Marty Tolland nodded.

"The one you're wearing, Tolland?"

"Yes?"

"Well, it's only that it's got three gold stripes on the left sleeve. Varsity stripes, right?"

Tolland nodded. "What are you driving at, Lieutenant?"

"Well now just hear me out on this, Marty. It seems to me this was a very professional killing. Probably a high-powered rifle with side-eject and a night scope site. I haven't checked in on the lab reports yet, but you can bet this wasn't the work of some kid with his birthday .22."

"So?"

"So, a guy who goes to all that trouble isn't going to hit the wrong pigeon—like a pigeon

with three gold stripes on his left sleeve."

"I see what you're driving at. If he'd seen my three-striped sweater on that porch, he wouldn't have fired."

"It was just a thought." Tige took in a fresh sip of coffee. "Tell me, Marty. When the doorbell rang, where were you and Peskova situated in the apartment. I mean geographically."

"It's like I told the other detectives," Tolland said. "Milos was in the kitchen whipping up a sandwich and I was over at my desk studying. I got a ten o'clock quiz tomorrow, in one of my business management courses."

"Well now that's a very interesting thing, now that I think about it," said Tige.

"How is that Lieutenant?"

"Well, it's just that you'd expect roomies to run a pretty functional household. Which also would mean the closest guy to the door would be apt to answer it."

Marty Tolland went into his own coffee cup before he answered. "Well, I was into my books very heavy, Lieutenant, so I just sort of automatically yelled out to Milos to catch the door. We do that all the time, or did that all the time."

"It was just something that bothered me a little. I guess it

isn't really that important. And there's one other little thing that has me bothered."

"I'll try to clear it up for you if I can, Lieutenant."

"You and Milos. You'd been roommates here in this duplex how long?"

"A little over a year, Lieutenant. Not counting a few weeks last summer when I spent some time with my folks in California."

"Pretty close friendship, I guess. What with you both being radio-television majors and star kicking specialists and all."

Tolland nodded. "So?"

"So it kind of bothered me some when I saw you sitting at that study desk. Under the tragic circumstances I wouldn't think you'd be able to concentrate worth a damn."

"Well, that's right, Lieutenant. Concentrating on the books is almost impossible when your buddy and roommate's been murdered in front of your eyes. But trying to keep busy helps me take my mind off it a little."

"Of course."

"Do you have anymore questions, Lieutenant?"

"Not at the present, Marty, no."

"I'll be here," Tolland said. "Take care of that hand, and take care of yourself."

IV

DRIVING back across town, Amory Tige reasoned with himself about the possibility of Milos Peskova's killer getting the wrong target. Marty Tolland did seem the prime receiver. His accurate foot represented quite an investment against Oregon City Tech on Saturday. With Tolland out of action the field goal burden would have fallen squarely on the shoulders of the young and untried Czech.

At his apartment Tige called Coach Carl Baumann.

"Carl, you better get ahold of Chief Drapper and have him keep the protection of Marty Tolland going around the clock until Saturday. These guys might be after both your kickers."

"You stop out to see Tolland?"

"Yes."

"What did you learn?"

"I learned that Campus Way is a beautiful drive."

The best betting brain in town was a former Los Vegas bartender named Benny the Mark, called that because of a pure golden heart and a reluctance to collect bets. He was a sucker for even the most suspicious of sob stories, a short-coming which eventually cost him the regard of the bigger betting syndicates.

Benny now held the franchise for the concession stalls at Logger Stadium, a five-months-a-year job he supplemented with a coffee wagon run in Gresham-Moore's downtown business district. When heads were turned he still wasn't adverse to jotting down a few illegal bets, but the department allowed him his freedom in exchange for street information.

"The Logger-Tech game?" said Benny over the phone. "A defensive, low-score mud-slogger. Both teams 5-0 in the conference. Give Gresham a little bit of an edge with the home crowd, and a little more for the artificial turf, which Tech don't have at home."

"Are the Loggers a touchdown favorite, then?" Tige asked him.

Benny laughed all over the telephone. "I said an edge, I didn't say the moon. Maybe a field goal. You make a phone call to the right person and take Tech and talk polite, you might get three points out of him."

"Out of who?" said Tige. "Bonsteele, you mean?"

Benny laughed again. "Who else in this town takes the big book but Sammy Bonsteele?"

"Think Sammy Bonsteele knows a Logger kicker caught a slug through the heart tonight?"

"Marty Tolland?"

"No. Milos Peskova, the Czech second-stringer."

"Waste of a bullet," said Benny. "Peskova wouldn't even have got in the game. He dead?"

"Dead as a goal post," he grunted.

"Rough, but it don't change no odds. Unless they're out to hit both of them. Without a Logger field goal kicker, it's an even game."

"Think Sammy Bonsteele's taking some big money on the Loggers?"

"And hedging his cash by putting out papers on the Logger kickers? Naw, that ain't Bonsteele's kind of game. Now, of course, a few syndicate bucks have been known to find their way in the back gate through Vegas. Along with a guy who don't do nothin' all day but sit in his hotel room by the phone, oiling and polishing a rifle."

"It's a thought."

"How did the Czech kid get it?" Benny asked.

"From a hillside across Campus Way."

"Don't get seen and don't get too close. That sounds very syndicate to me, Tige. And if that's the way it is, it won't do you no good checking hotels and motels. This guy isn't being paid to stick around long. He probably changes in his car and

takes sponge baths in the trunk."

"Thanks, Benny."

Tige's next call was to Sammy Bonsteele, via the telephonic rudeness of three intermediaries.

"This better be important, Lieutenant. You woke a very soundly sleeping man."

"Get off it, Bonsteele. The last time you slept was just before you were born."

"Get to the point, Lieutenant."

"All right, the point is this. About ten o'clock last night somebody put a nice neat little bullet hole in a football player."

If Bonsteele was knocked out of his chair by the news, he'd fallen into feathers. "Name?"

"Milos Peskova, the Gresham-Moore place kicker."

"What kind of joke is that, Tige? Killing the Czech is like killing a third-string tackle with a weight problem. Who did it?"

"A guy with a high-powered rifle, night site and utterly no sense of fair play."

"Name?"

"Thought you might be able to help me out there," said Tige.

"You thought," answered Bonsteele. "Look, I'm clean, Tige. I run a little book to keep me in filter money for my pool,

but I don't go in for killing. You know that."

"All right. I know that. Answer me this, then. You been taking any big bets on the Tech game Saturday?"

"Big? How big is big?"

"Anything over ten thousand dollars and anything over 2-1."

"I took some action of the size you speak. Monday and Tuesday."

"Name?"

"I think we got us a bad telephone connection here, Tige. What did you say?"

"Okay, forget the question."

"Pleasure," said Sammy Bonsteele. "You got any more, or are we going to stand here and keep each other up all night?"

"Bonsteele, is it syndicate money?"

"Syndicate? Bets don't come with labels on them, not bets that big. You get a telephone call, you get a bet. And then, depending how the game comes out, you either pay a visit or get paid one."

"Name, Bonsteele."

"You know I can't tell you who's behind it, Tige. So don't ask me."

"How much, then? You can at least tell me that."

"And I can at least get killed for telling you."

"Okay: Is it more than fifty



thousand dollars?" asked Tige.

"Tige, you got a very rude way with people, you know that? Okay. Yes, it's a bundle bigger than fifty thou'. And I'm a bigger fool than the village idiot for telling you. Good night, Tige."

"Is it Vegas money?"

"Good night, Tige."

V

THE NEXT morning was Thursday and it dawned on Lieutenant Amory Tige like the third day before the end of the world. He called the duplex apartment even before piling out of bed. When he learned there now were two men assigned to guard Marty Tolland, he felt easier. He even took a shave and had some breakfast.

Logger Stadium that afternoon had tighter security from within than a federal prison. All entrance gates were guarded by city police and members of Gresham-Moore College's security force. All tunnels, locker rooms and stands were continually checked by roving patrolmen and detectives and no one but players, coaches and trainers were allowed on the field.

But the tension didn't seem to bother Marty Tolland. He wandered the playing field, in his kicking shoes, padless jersey and cutoff shorts, like a kid strolling around a meadow. And then to cap his apparent lack of fear or concern he booted fifteen practice field goals from twenty yards, without a miss.

"Fifteen without a miss," said Tige when Tolland came to the sidelines for an ice cube and a wedge of orange.

"You were counting."

Tige stared through the maze of protective ribs on Tolland's helmet and tried to find the eyes.

"I was waiting for you to miss a couple. With a killer out there someplace, scheming and planning an opportunity to get a clean shot at you, a few misses would be understandable and forgivable."

Did the eyes inside that dark cave of helmet look away an instant?

"Yes, well you people got a

pretty good zone defense thrown up around this stadium. It gives a guy a feeling of real security."

"But you must know we can make mistakes, can get a little careless for that instant it takes to aim a rifle and squeeze the trigger."

"I'm very philosophical about it, Lieutenant Tige. If your number's up, it's up. If your time is due, no amount of security is going to hold back the clock. Now, if you'll excuse me, Lieutenant, I gotta run my laps. How's the wrist, by the way?"

"It's coming along," Tige told him.

"Yeah, well you take care of yourself, Lieutenant."

It was the second time Marty Tolland had told him that.

Tige drove back to the apartment on Campus Way. The same patrolman, Lou Kravitz, who had been on duty the evening before was pulling a double shift.

"Lieutenant Tige. How's the hand?"

"Mending," Tige said. "How's the action here today?"

"Lousy. Two plainclothes officers took Tolland out about nine for his classes. You're my first visitor."

Tige nodded his head toward the grassy knoll two hundred yards away and five hundred

feet up. "How's the action been up there?"

"Slower," Kravitz said. "Another detective up there, has been ever since the killing. Lieutenant Sparlin. Do you know him?"

"Bad golfer, good family man. I came by to have a look inside."

"Sure, Lieutenant, but you'll be wasting your time. Last night, before you got here, they went over that apartment like flies over spoiled meat."

"Well then I guess one more fly buzzing around isn't going to spoil things any more."

Tige put some water on for a cup of instant coffee and had taken off his suit coat when the telephone rang.

"Hello."

"Who is this?" said the familiar voice.

"Lieutenant Tige. Chief Drapper?"

"What are you doing in the Peskova apartment? Aren't you suppose to be on sick days?"

"I was feeling better," Tige told him.

"Well go back to your Epsom salts and whirlpool treatments. I didn't assign you to this number and I don't want a one-armed detective gumming up the works."

"I'm just staying around the edges," Tige told him. "What did you call about?"

"Well, this Peskova boy, according to a telephone memo here for me this morning, called downtown last night about six-thirty."

"What about?"

"I've no idea," said Drapper. "He wouldn't talk to the desk sergeant or anybody in the other departments. You know how many of these kind of calls we get. Everybody thinks the whole department is wired for crime, corruption and pay-offs and so they won't talk to anybody but the man in charge."

"The desk sergeant give Peskova your home telephone number?" asked Tige.

"Yes, but the kid never called. In view of what happened to him later, it's even more puzzling that he hadn't tried to contact me. I just don't get it. You make anything out of it, Tige?"

"Well no, not at the moment, sir."

"Neither can I. Except very likely what the kid had to say to me was probably pretty damned important. And he may have been killed over it. If you've any ideas on this, Tige, don't hold back."

"You can't hold back what you haven't got."

"Any hunches?"

"One. I'd like to talk with the investigating officer about

the statement he took from Marty Tolland."

"The roommate."

"Yes."

"Lieutenant Toppenish was the senior man. Hang tight and I'll punch you over to Homicide."

Toppenish was juggling two balls at once, a family homicide and the Peskova case. He was interviewing. Tige gave Homicide his number and underscored the matter's importance.

He had his coffee mixed and doctored when the phone rang again.

"You want some dope on the Peskova killing. Right, Tige?"

"Tolland's testimony about his activities after he returned to his apartment after football practice yesterday afternoon."

"Got it right here," said Toppenish. "Just a shake. Okay. Tolland returned to the apartment at 6:35: Wednesday wasn't crash and bang day, just a light workout in pads. He stopped off at the library for a reference text, chatted with a coed in the quadrangle and then went back to the apartment."

"With Milos Peskova?"

"No. Peskova's movements after football practice are still a mystery, but we're working on it. But he must have got back to the apartment before Tolland did, because he made a phone

call from there to Chief Drapper at 6:28."

"Okay. Tolland got back there at 6:35. What next?"

"Well according to Tolland, at 6:45 he put two macaroni dinners in the oven, one for him and one for Peskova. While they were cooking, Peskova went to his room and hit the books and Tolland did the same at his study table in the living room. At approximately 7:30 they had dinner, which seems to check. In a paper sack next to the refrigerator we found two discarded teevee dinner trays."

"Go on," said Tige.

"To where?" said Toppenish. "It's as dead end as everything else. After dinner, Peskova went back to his room to study, and Tolland went back to his study desk in the living room. About 9:50 Peskova took a break and went into the kitchen to make a snack. Tolland verifies that almost to the minute, because the noise in the kitchen distracted him and he checked his watch."

"And then the ring of the front doorbell."

"Right," said Toppenish. "Tolland yelled for Peskova to answer it. He did, and that's the last thing he did on this earth."

"What did you find in the kitchen?"

"Just what you'd expect to

find," Toppenish said. "Two slices of bread on a cutting board, one covered with a slab of bologna. An open mayonnaise jar, some rinsed lettuce. I put the stuff away myself. No sense letting good food spoil. That's about it, Tige. The Tolland kid called us immediately, then called his coach."

"That's it?"

"The whole transcript, Tige. You sound almost like a man who doesn't believe what he hears."

"I don't believe a lot of things. Like someone not automatically answering a front door when it's only an arm's reach away. And someone so distraught over his friend's death he immediately dives into his books while the body's still warm. And someone who fears he'll be killed along with his teammate, but kicks field goals like they're about to be outlawed by the N.C.A.A. rules committee. Don't you see. Toppenish? Everything fits... but nothing fits."

"No, I don't see, Tige. Listen, you got anything else hot? I got a homicide suspect in interrogation and I don't want him to get a chance to collect his thoughts."

"No, nothing else, Top. Thanks, but no thanks."

"You can't win 'em all, Tige, sweetheart."

VI

AMORY TIGE puts up the receiver with more anger than his healing left wrist could take. The pain of his tendonitis flared up again, shooting the length of his arm. He deserved it. The pain was as good as a kick in the pants. All the inconsistencies and deceits were laid out in front of him but he wasn't reading them at all.

For fifteen minutes he wandered the small duplex unit, opening drawers, peeking in closets, scanning papers, and then gave up. If an answer to Peskova's death was within these walls, it was doing an excellent job of undercover work.

What now? Should he wait for Marty Tolland's return from football practice and cover the same old frustrating ground? Should he call Benny the Mark again, who was neck-deep in the problems of hot dogs and mustard and hot coffee and had no time for a cop who had no leads? Or should he bug Sammy Bonsteele for information he'd sooner reveal than family skeletons? Or should he just wander off for a couple of stiff drinks and think the whole, puzzling things over?

As Tige stepped out onto the stoop of the apartment the rifle

blast came as unexpectedly as a bolt of lightning tearing through a clear, blue sky.

Tige didn't wait for a second reprieve. When the shot whizzed past his left ear he made a blind drive into shrubbery, with the patrolman not far behind or far away. Tige could feel the man's heavy breathing against his cheek.

"The knoll, Lieutenant!"

"Terrific," Tige whispered. "At this distance, you pull off a pistol round at a bird and he'll catch it in his beak and throw it back."

"So, what do we do?"

"We lay flat for a few minutes and pray Lieutenant Sparlin can still play golf on Saturdays and go home to a bawling out from his wife."

Tige scrambled back into the apartment and ordered all patrol units available to Lakecrast Knoll, a roadblock set-up a mile down Lakecrest Drive in both directions.

"They must have been after you, Lieutenant Tige," said Kravitz, as the two of them caught their breaths inside the apartment. "I've been out on that stoop for two hours like a sitting duck and I haven't got so much as a boo-pig."

"But why?" Tige said, as he wrestled with a new part of a growing puzzle. "Because I'm nosing around?"

"Or because you're getting close," said Kravitz.

"But close to *what*? And *where*?"

"Something in the apartment? If it is, and they suspect you found it, then they surely don't want you walking out of here alive."

"What do you suggest, Kravitz?"

"I really don't know, Lieutenant. Another search of the apartment? Could be you missed whatever it is they think you found."

Tige sat down on the couch to think. Thought didn't come easy, but one finally did emerge. They had established the last person to see Milos Peskova alive. But where was the last place Peskova was *seen* alive? The doorstep on which he'd been killed? Yes.

The living room through which he'd walked to answer the door Marty Tolland was too imbedded in studies to answer himself? Yes. The kitchen where Milos Peskova had fixed himself an early evening snack? Yes. But beyond that. Before that. Where? *Of course!* His bedroom, where he had been studying!

Tige had gone through the small, cramped bedroom once before but now he went over it like Toppenish's proverbial fly over spoiled meat. He searched

in every pocket of every garment, through every page in every book, through every word in every notebook Milos Peskova had. And throughout his search one vital, very deadly fact drove him.

Milos Peskova, on the night of his death, had called the police about a matter so urgent and dangerous, it could not even be entrusted to a police desk sergeant. And it was a matter he could not follow up with a second call to Chief Drapper at his home. But why? If what Peskova had to tell the police was so important, why had he not, immediately called the home telephone number given him by the desk sergeant?

The answer to that question hit Tige with the raw force of the bullet which had slammed into Milos Peskova's heart. Why? Because Marty Tolland had come home! Because Milos Peskova's roommate had interrupted him on the heels of his call to the police and very likely even during it! Yes, that must have been it! It wasn't unimportance that had kept Peskova from making that second call to Chief Drapper, but fear!

Tige continued searching the room like a man gone mad. Officer Kravitz had already been dispatched back to his post on the porch to delay

Marty Tolland's entry should he appear. That gave him free time. But it was free time going wasted, because he was searching blind for something he knew existed! A warning from Milos Peskova that he had learned something that was dangerous to have learned, and had lived long enough to lay an intelligent clue!

There seemed now nothing that Tige had not checked and he plopped down on Peskova's bed exhausted and enraged. The room spun its objects before his eyes: the open closet door, a hi-fi stereo set, a guitar hanging from a wall by its shoulder strap. Peskova's desk jammed with momentous objects from his athletic past.

And then it caught Tige's eye, a filigree thing no whiter than a soft fog, script writing in white over the pebbly-grained leather of a football propped up on a kicking tee on Milos Peskova's desk. Done in what looked like white shoe polish the two words were nearly a perfectly blend with autographs and game scores. Two words which were at once beautifully revealing and ugly to behold.

VII

WHEN Marty Tolland returned from football drills he didn't appear to be surprised

that Lieutenant Tige was still in his hair. He dropped his books on the couch and spread his arms.

"Look, Lieutenant. No bullet holes."

"I don't think you expected any."

"No, not really," said Tolland, flashing that easy, All-America smile Tige had now come to despise. "Thanks to a police department that runs a very tight stadium."

"Nice college try, Tolland, but that wasn't the reason you had nothing to fear. You acted as free as a bird out there on that practice field today because you knew there wasn't a bullet meant for you."

"I knew what? Are you feeling all right, Lieutenant?"

"Better all the time," Tige said. "In fact, I feel so good, I'm going to tell you exactly how and why you had Milos Peskova murdered."

Tige didn't buy the look of incredulity, but he gave Tolland a C+ for the attempt. "Murder? Really, Lieutenant. I think that case of tendonitis of yours is starting to affect your mind."

"Well, before they come with the white jacket and take me off to the farm, let me elaborate. You were never a target for murder because you'd been bought for a fix. You were more valuable alive than dead

because you represented two or three missed field goals, which add up to the odds and point spread by which Gresham-Moore was expected to win."

"What is this missed field goal business? I don't miss field goals. Don't you ever drop your nose into a newspaper? I'm automatic, Lieutenant."

"You're automatic, all right. As automatic as the heavy rains predicted for Saturday. As automatic as the slippery field and the wet football. And as automatic as the absence of suspicion if you should squib a couple of bad kicks from twenty or thirty yards out."

Marty Tolland's smile didn't go away. "Okay. So I'm a fixer and a murderer. So what's my motive? Money? My folks own the biggest travel agency in Southern California. Anytime I need a few bucks, I do the telegram-bit and I got ready cash in two hours."

"Who knows what drives people to excesses of greed?" Tige said. "No, you don't need money, Tolland. Not like Milos Peskova needed it, with a father running out his life at \$180 a week in a steel rolling mill, in addition to working weekends and nights as a plant security guard so his son wouldn't have to get his text books from the campus library, or do his laundry in the bathroom sink,

or feel like two-cents and two inches tall when that new pitcher of beer came due and he had to borrow couple of bucks to pay for his round.

"No, you didn't need the money, Tolland. Not like Milos Peskova needed it. You merely wanted it. Need is a noble, commendable human trait, Tolland, but not want in excess of need. That's a sickness psychiatrists haven't yet found an answer for."

Marty Tolland laughed, but the laugh was a false one, filled with fear.

"I think I can manage to tell you about how the ball rolled," said Tige.

"Be my guest, Lieutenant. I always did like a bedtime fantasy to put me in a mood for sleep."

"The syndicate boys got wind of this small college in Oregon, flush on the doorstep of a conference championship and carried there on the magical foot of a field goal kicker who seldom missed. Add to that a conference title pitting two even teams with identical records, a muddy field and a lot of liquid sunshine, and you have all the ingredients for a easy day's pay but one."

"But one," said Tolland. "And what would that missing ingredient be, Lieutenant Tige?"

"The miraculous kicker's cooperation," Tige said.

"And the reason I'd sell out my college football team for a few bucks?"

"Power fixation, perhaps. Let's fact it, Tolland. You enjoy the status of owning a weapon that can turn a football game around with one swift kick. But that weapon also comes with a curse because place-kickers are regarded as something like freaks by their teammates. They can't pass, they don't possess the raw speed or agility of a running back, or the heft of a lineman, or the manueverability or sticky hands of a pass catcher. For fifty-nine minutes of every ballgame, Tolland, you're an outsider with a momentary talent."

"So you're saying I killed Peskova to get even with my teammates," said Tolland. "That wouldn't stand up in court even on a pair of crutches."

"It's generally admitted by your teammates," Tige went on, "that you'd like a crack at pro football. And it's also generally admitted that the saturation point for field goal kickers is rapidly being reached. Too many specialists and a lack of attrition makes job hunting in the field risky at best. Just how old is George Blanda now,

anyway. Forty-five? Forty-six?

"What am I, an almanac?"

"It would be nice to have a few bucks to carry you along during those first few years of your possible unemployment."

Again Marty Tolland laughed. It still rang tin.

"And I'm going to get a guy killed just for a few bucks to tide me through the lean years?"

"No, murder wasn't supposed to be any part of this thing," Tige said. "At least you were convinced of that. Here's the way I think this nightmare was put together. A Las Vegas syndicate approached you. You liked their offer and bought it.

"It was all set and foolproof, except for your roommate. Milos Peskova discovered the fix. Last night he tried to contact Chief Drapper by telephone with the information, entrusting it to no one else. Chief Drapper was not in, but from a desk sergeant Milos got his home telephone number.

"But Milos Peskova never had a chance to call Chief Drapper because at that moment you walked in the door from football drills. Very likely you also overhead Milos talking on the phone before you came through that front door.

"With that suspicion running around in your brain, you began to panic. If Milos knew

about the fix the chances were good that he'd get that knowledge into the right hands before Saturday's game."

Marty Tolland didn't appear to be very impressed. "Okay," he told Tige, "if Milos knew overhead that telephone call, why didn't he get out of the apartment as quick as he could and head straight downtown?"

"Because he wasn't aware he'd been overhead. If he had, he'd have run, as you mentioned. I suspect he just decided to hold his knowledge of the fix until morning."

"Lieutenant, your imagination is incredible."

"While Milos was in his room studying, you placed a phone call to your contact man in the syndicate and told them what you knew. Very possibly you were told they'd send someone around to the apartment to have a little talk with Milos, offer him a piece of the action in exchange for his silence. Of course, neophyte that you are in these things, you expected a little convincing pushing and shoving at the very most. But the syndicate doesn't work that way. When that doorbell rang last night, Milos Peskova was as good as dead."

Tolland was silent.

"Milos Peskova's death shook you up quite a jolt, but you kept your cool. The fix was

still safe and still on. So you called the police and then Carl Baumann and worked out your story. But it had holes in it big enough to run ten fullbacks abreast. You fabricated the double-murder bit nicely, only you didn't seem to show enough concern for your own life. And then this business with the intent studying last night and your reluctance to open a front door that wasn't ten feet away. And, of course, this business with the sandwich in the kitchen. What kind was that Milos was preparing. Liverwurst? Bacon and tomatoe?"

"Bologna, bologna. What is this," Tolland asked, "Name That Recipe?"

Tige let loose a slight smile. "You see now, Tolland, you're crammed full of inconsistencies. I talked with Lieutenant Toppenish, the detective who interviewed you after Milos' murder. According to your testimony, you told him the last time you stepped into the kitchen was to prepare your evening meal at 7:00.

After inspecting the kitchen, Lieutenant Toppenish returned the ingredients to that sandwich back to the refrigerator. So if Milos had really made that little snack, you would have had utterly no idea of its ingredients. But Milos didn't make it. You did. Just to add a little

convincing icing to this incredible tale."

"And what does all this add up to?"

"It all adds up to the fact that the remainder of this week and the next, you're going to have more cops hanging around you than fat people hanging around a reducing spa. Some much as a nickel gets passed to you and we'll be jumping on it before you even get it into a pocket. And we've got some hard evidence now, as well, Tolland. Would you care to see it?"

"See it?"

From behind his back, Tige brought out the autographed football and tossed it across the room to Tolland.

"Turn that pigskin around very carefully, Tolland, and you'll discover amid all those scores and signatures, Milos Peskova's cry for help. Just two words. MARTY-FIX. We won't have any trouble proving those words to be in Peskova's handwriting."

All the air let out of Marty Tolland's resistance and denial now, his hands let the football drop to the floor.

"You know something, Lieutenant? For a guy who slouches around in a wrinkled shirt, gee-whiz digging his toe in the dirt, you really get the job done. If you'd hadn't come

nosing around like some shaggy beagle I think I could have weathered this thing."

"Yeah, well I don't look like much, Tolland. But that's part of the beauty of me. Should we make a trip downtown, now?"

Tolland looked toward the door. "Is it safe out there?"

"Relax, Tolland. By now, I have a feeling there are more cops up on that knoll than the guy in charge knows what to do with."

"For what it's worth, Lieutenant, I'm miserable about how this turned out for Milos. I kind of liked him as a roomie."

"Yeah. Well, I know three people who are more miserable," Tige told him.

"Who?"

"His parents."

"You said three. Who's the other?"

"Did you have to ask?" said Amory Tige. "Milos Peskova, of course."



In the Next Issue—A Story You'll Hardly Forget

MURDER AT DONDO BEACH

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

She lay very still in her silken bed. Lush, made for men—very dead. Mike Shayne stared out into the hostile night. Somewhere out there, lethal, ever waiting, the same fate waited for him, unless he could break through a ring of Murder and find the killer first. Don't fail to read this engrossing novel of terror and sudden death. It's a must!



The LAST STAMP

by
P.
A.
B
R
I
S
C
O

A life with a nagging, unfaithful wife was no life at all, he knew. But there was still Death...

I OFTEN find myself thinking back over the events of the last few days. I enjoy doing so, for the events proceed in a logical and orderly manner, and I do appreciate order.

This trait has always caused my wife, Edna, considerable

vexation. Edna has always considered herself above such mundane considerations as neatness and order. This trait has intensified since the beginning of the year, when she became involved in the Women's Liberation Movement; an

association which has inspired her to be free and unconfined.

She will come home from work—she has only recently taken a job—looking weary and noble. Then she will disrobe, strewing her clothing over the furniture and upon the floor, and attire herself in a mud-colored, baggy garment, that is supposed to represent some sort of native dress. Then our stimulating evening conversation begins.

"Mmph! Did I have a hard day today! Something you wouldn't know about. I suppose you've been futtzing around with those silly stamps of yours all day."

"Why yes, I have been working on my stamps. I acquired a very nice topical today."

"Whatever that is. How can you waste your time on those silly bits of paper when the work is in turmoil! Why don't you go out and do something useful with your time."

A shake of the head, hands on wide hips, she said, "Take Ed, now. He's doing something useful, constructive. He's doing a job that people need. You're just useless, Harry. You're a parasite, a noncontributing member of society!"

I bite my lip, and refrain from saying that Ed Alber is a low grade moron with a certain

animal cunning for exploitation. He performs a service that people need, all right, but more often than not, charges them for services that he did not perform. He has a reputation all over town for being the biggest gouge artist in the garage business. Alber is also our next door neighbor, a man of low forehead and lower morals. He is also Edna's boss.

Occasionally during one of our discussions, I will try to reach Edna on her own ground, using her own logic, or lack of it.

"I'm not a parasite, Edna. It's not fair to call me one. I have an income, as you very well know. We don't live on Welfare. I've always taken care of myself, and you."

"That's not the point, Harry. You didn't earn that money. Your father did."

"True, but the money is mine now, honestly mine. I am not taking anything from anyone else. And then there are my stamps. They bring in some income."

"Stamps!" Throwing down her fork in disgust. "Why don't you do something manly bowling for instance? That's a real hobby for a man."

I bite my lip again to keep from carrying the argument further. My stamps are not a hobby, rather an avocation.

There is no use in telling her again that some very famous and clever men have been philatelists. She has never, not even in the early years of our marriage, taken an interest in my stamps.

When we were first married, Edna was a bright-eyed, athletic girl with a good deal of wholesome charm. She had been most anxious to get married, but once her matrimonial objective was gained, another Edna began to show through the bridal gloss. However, our marriage was bearable until the advent of Women's Lib, and the muscular Alber.

The Albers, Edward, and his wife, Carrie, moved into our neighborhood about nine months ago. I could tell at once that Alber was one of those foul-mouthed, sweaty men, who think masculinity is evidenced by a hairy chest and the lack of an underarm deodorant. I quickly vowed to stay away from them as much as possible, but Edna took an immediate fancy to them, or I should say, him.

Alber, the back-slapping, "Hiya fellas" type, thought it would be "great" if the four of us got together for a few beers. The few evenings we spent with them were interminable, and would have been unbearable if it had not been for Carrie, Mrs.

Alber; a sweet little woman, who seemed absolutely cowed by her husband.

While Edna and Alber drank beer and discussed the Dodger's standing, Mrs. Alber and I discussed art and chess, which to my great surprise, she played. Of course we never had a game during those evenings. We would have been laughed out of the house, still, her conversation did make the evenings bearable.

The Albers had been living next to us for about six months, when Edna told me she was going to take a job. It seemed that Ed needed a clerk for the office of his garage.

"One of us, at least, should contribute something to society," was the way she put it. I pointed out that economically it was not necessary, but it seemed that that wasn't the point. She wanted to do something. She wanted to "express her emancipation".

I shrugged. So far her expressions of freedom had consisted of going without a bra and girdle, esthetic errors on her part. If she wanted to be "free," if she wanted to "contribute", why should I gainsay her. Besides, I was thinking of all those beautiful, quiet hours without her complaints and nagging. So, she went to work.

For a few weeks, things were peaceful and calm. Once in a while in the afternoon, I would walk over to the Alber's and have a game of chess with Carrie. It was rather pleasant. Then, one afternoon, a thought came to me, and I began to wonder what it was that Edna was contributing to Alber's Garage. After all, her typing was impossible, and her arithmetical knowledge sketchy, to say the least. Also, she had begun to work late almost every other night, and I couldn't help but question that her contribution was entirely clerical.

The question was academic, really. Any feeling I felt for Edna had long since been trampled underfoot by her. Still, a man does not like to be made a fool of. People talk; they talk and they laugh.

When it reached the point where the neighbors stopped their conversations and looked embarrassed when I approached them, I decided to take steps. Of course, there was divorce; but it is such a messy business, and then, there is the expense. And divorce would not stop the sniggering. When a man leaves a woman, the woman is the object of pity, but when a woman leaves a man, he is the object of ridicule. Unjust, but that's the way it is. There was only one real alternative.

I spent considerable time and effort coming up with a workable idea... I planned it very carefully, for, as I have said, I am orderly by nature.

During the passage of the years, I have discovered that some very unusual stamps can be purchased, if one knows the right people. These stamps are available to anyone with the right connections and the right amount of money. Fortunately, I had both. The stamp I ordered was not a particularly rare stamp, but the glue, on the back of it, was very special indeed. And that brings me to the events of the last few days.

The stamp arrived last Tuesday, along with my regular order. I put it carefully away. Then I went out and bought a pair of plain, white gardening gloves from my local supermarket.

That night Edna worked late. After she called and said that she would not be home, I went next door to borrow a cup of sugar from Carrie Alber. Strangely enough, she too had just had a call. It seemed that Ed would be working late, also.

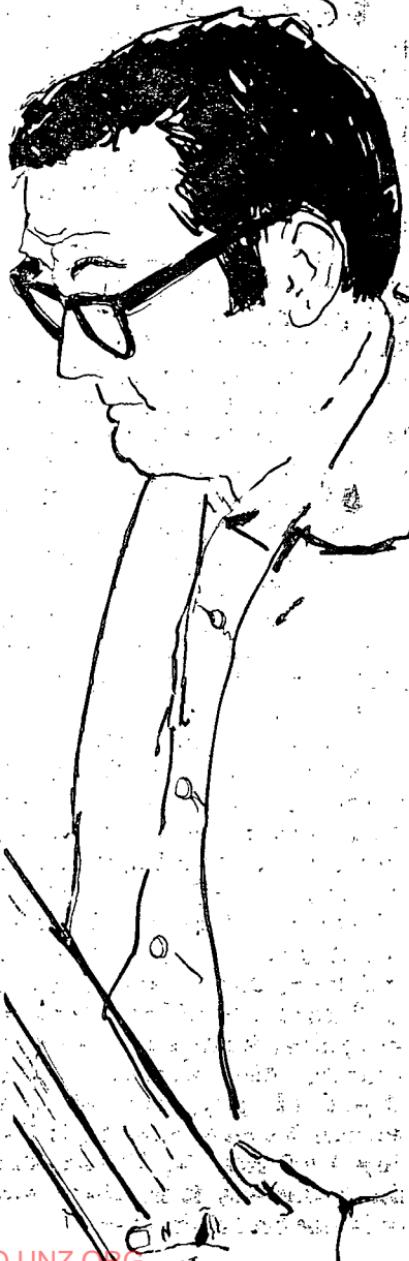
I went back to my house, put the sugar in the cannister, and went out to my car. I drove to within a few blocks of Alber's Garage. Then I approached the building on foot. The whole place was dark, except for a

small, lighted window in the rear. I approached it cautiously and quietly. There was a small space visible between the curtain and the sill. I peered in, and saw what I had expected to see. My wife, and Ed Alber, in squilid embrace.

But what interested me was the room itself. A small, dirty room; hung with Alber's changes of clothing. The room contained a rather narrow iron bed, two chairs, and a small table. On the table was a bottle and two glasses full of liquor. I allowed myself a small smile, for I had hoped for such a room. I knew that they must tryst someplace. It was almost too good to be true that their meeting place was the garage itself. I walked quietly back to my car, pleased with the way things were going.

Wednesday morning, after Edna left for work, I wrote the notes. One was to my good friend Oliver Ernest, a fellow philatelist in Eckert, saying that I would like to come out this weekend to discuss a possible purchase with him. I told him I was planning to arrive Friday night, and asked him to wire a reply.

The other note I typed on my wife's old typewriter: *Ed, I must see you. You can't just break it off, like this. Harry is out of town for the weekend.*



Meet me at the usual place. If you aren't there Friday night at 8:00 I will tell your wife everything!

I signed with a sloppy *E*; the usual method by which Edna signs her letters. The third note was to the milkman, asking him for one quart of milk instead of two on Saturday morning.

That evening I anxiously awaited Edna's arrival home. Would she remain true to form? She did. She arrived home on time, and we had one of our lovely, companionable evenings.

I watched her as she wrote some brief letters to her family. Sprawled at the desk, she finished the letters, then put them into envelopes. I grimaced as she licked the stamps with her great, pink tongue. Long ago I had purchased a stamp sponge and dish for her to use, but she never made use of it.

Afterward, as she lounged indifferently in front of the television set, I went into the bedroom and looked through her purse. I found what I had hoped to find, a strange key that belonged to no door in our house. It could only be the key to Alber's garage. I put it into my pocket. After telling Edna that I was running down to the drug store for a moment, I went down to our local shoe store; which stayed open until nine, and made keys. In half an hour,

the key was back in Edna's purse, and I had a perfect duplicate.

On Friday morning, I waited until Edna left for work in her car, then I got into mine, and drove to the small gas station where I usually get my car serviced. The station is, conveniently, only a few blocks from Alber's Garage. I chatted cheerfully with the attendant, telling him I was leaving on a trip late this evening, and would like my car checked over beforehand. Since they close at seven, I told him to leave the keys in the car, and I would have my wife drive me down to pick it up about eight.

At five-thirty, I was home, and anxiously awaiting the sound of Edna's car. I was much relieved when I heard it clunking into the drive. She asked me where my car was, and I told her it was being serviced. Of course this sent her off on her usual diatribe about my not patronizing Alber's Garage, but I tuned it out and concentrated on my stamps. The constant drone and whine of her voice kept up its usual accompaniment to my activities while she got out of her work clothes and into the sleazy garment that served as her "at home" attire.

After dinner, she left the dishes on the table and flopped

down in front of the television set. It was then that I approached her.

"Edna, how would you like to see a movie tonight? There's a new Steve McQueen movie at the Wiltown."

Her lusterless eyes began to brighten. Steve McQueen, as well as Ed Alber, could induce this phenomenon.

She sniffed. "I'd have to get dressed."

I held my breath, waiting, for that was the whole idea.

Finally, she nodded, and hoisted herself from the chair.

"Only be a minute. When does the picture start?"

"Half an hour," I lied. She would never know that Steve McQueen was not playing that night.

She disappeared into the bedroom, and I went to my stamp cabinet and got out my large book, and the new batch of stamps. When she returned to the living room, coated and lipsticked, she found me putting stamps into my album.

Hands on hips, she surveyed me glumly, expressing her displeasure in one explicit word.

I looked up appologetically, I hoped for the last time. I jumped up immediately, holding a stamp in my hand. The stamp.

"Sorry dear. Got carried

away, I guess. Just let me put this one last stamp in. It will only take a minute."

Then, as if I had just thought of it that moment, I held the stamp out toward her.

"Here, why don't you put it in for me, while I get my coat. It goes just there, in that empty space."

She hesitated for a moment, then took the stamp and looked at it critically. "You and your crazy little pieces of colored paper. "Well, go on, get your coat."

I walked out of the room casually, but my stomach was a knot of tenseness. I stood in the darkness of the hallway for a long moment, barely breathing, then I heard what I was waiting for, a muffled grunt and a dull thump.

I gingerly stuck my head around the corner of the doorway. Edna lay half on the floor and half on the couch. She was very still. Her expression expressed surprise and pain. I looked down at my album. The stamp was placed more or less neatly in its place. Next to the album was the box of hinges that I used to mount my stamps. Of course Edna had not used one. In the fifteen years of our marriage, she had not paid enough attention to my actions to know that I used them. She had, of course, licked

the stamp. I had counted on that.

I had a profitable and pleasant visit with Oliver, until the police called me on Saturday afternoon. They found out where I was from Oliver's wire, which I had left on my desk.

Of course, I returned home immediately, and expressed deep shock and outrage at the news they had to tell me. My wife had been murdered, and my neighbor, Edward Alber, was accused of the crime. Edna had been found in the back room of his garage. It was evident that they had met there before. There were glasses in the room, bearing both of their fingerprints.

A note was found in the pocket of one of his sweaters, which was hanging on a wall peg, next to Edna's coat; a note

that gave him an excellent motive for her elimination. The police had not yet determined how he administered the poison, but in the face of the mounting evidence, this obviously appeared to be a minor point.

I, of course, denied knowing anything of the relationship between my wife and Alber. After all, isn't the husband the last to know? The neighbors, though, all seemed to be well informed, and came forward with considerable evidence linking the two. The consensus is that Alber does not stand a chance.

It has been a week now. The neighbors are friendly, and solicitous. The house is peaceful and quiet. This afternoon I may visit Carrie Alber for a game of chess. She plays very well, for a woman.



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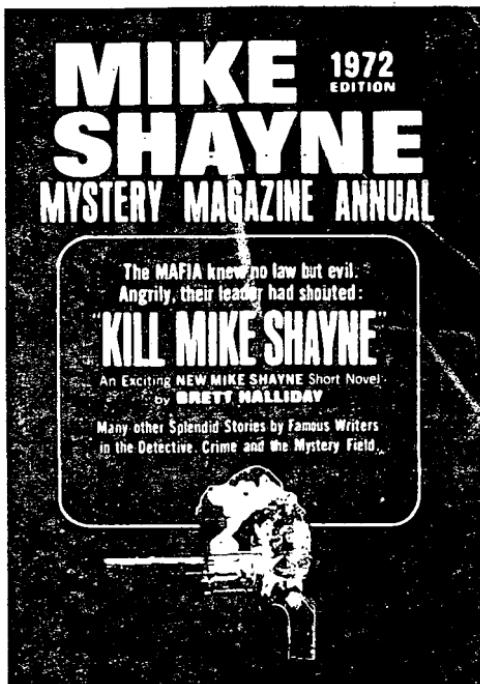
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DANCE MACABRE

*She was lush and lovely and leaded with
bucks and all men paid her homage. But
she had chosen this night a most un-
fortunate partner—a chap called Death.*

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

RAIN SLANTED down, huge drops shattering like glass on the VW's hood, as I angled into a parking slot across the street from Milo's Ballroom.

I was without a raincoat. The weather sages had been trumpeting rain all day, but like most Los Angeles residents, I ignored weather forecasts.

I uncoiled my six feet two from the bug and scurried across the street to shelter under the marquee before the ballroom. The front had the look of an abandoned movie house, with a blinking row of lights on the marquee, and a ticket box. Many of the lightbulbs were broken, and paint was peeling like scabs from the stucco facade.

Milo's was located in a seedy

downtown section. But it had been in business for twenty-five years, and the customers didn't like changes, most of all modernization and improvement. They came to Milo's seeking the past like vintage wine, and would brook nothing to destroy that image.

I paid my buck and a half admission and stepped into the past, thirty-five years into the past.

As advertised, Milo's was a dancehall, but it wasn't a dime-a-dance palace, it wasn't an Arthur Murray-type studio, and certainly it was far removed from acid rock. Inside Milo's it was 1930—something, the years of the big bands—Benny Goodman, Guy Lombardo, et cetera—and the tune I heard as I



stepped inside was, "Happy days are here again,/The skies above are clear again."

But the band on the podium at the far end of the big room had only ten members, and the couples on the ballroom floor wore mod clothes, some of the women even in hot pants. They were all, with a few exceptions,

past fifty, some even in their sixties or older.

I edged down the side of the room, past a long row of theater-type chairs filled with the hopefuls, middle-aged ladies painted and bedizened, wearing

a wallflower look like a pass-out stamp, forlornly waiting to be asked to dance.

I ignored the hopeful glances slanted my way and worked on down the room, past a crowded bar tended by a black bartender and to an area of small tables.

A blonde sat alone at the third table, as out of place as a prostitute at prayer meeting. About thirty, with the exciting figure of a go-go dancer, she was the target of a number of baleful stares from the middle-aged women at nearby tables. She wore a pants suit, with a long-sleeved, green-flecked blouse.

I stopped at her table. "Mrs. Standish? Mrs. Lionel Standish?"

She glanced up, full mouth curving. Her eyes were green. "Mr. Plummer?"

"That's right, Lincoln Plummer."

"Sit down, Lincoln." A gloved hand motioned. "And I'm Paula, please."

"And I'm Linc, if this is the informal hour."

"My husband has gone to get us a drink."

"He's here? He knows you called me?"

"I had second thoughts about not telling him. I considered telling him you're something other than a private detective. But I doubt it would

have worked. I've never been able to lie to him and carry it off successfully. But I must warn you, Linc. He's not happy about it. He says he's been threatened before. That's why he refuses to get the police in. Anybody wanting to kill him will have to take their place in line."

After her call to me, I'd done a little checking on Lionel Standish. He'd held the reins of an industrial complex until two years ago. In semi-retirement after a heart attack, he still had large real estate holdings. A millionaire at thirty, he'd left enemies strewn in his path like a bulldozer plowing through a forest of frail saplings.

Paula Standish took a cigarette out of her purse. I held a match for her and said, "This threat. How did it come?"

"In an envelope, postmarked North Hollywood, no return address. Three lines, the letters clipped out of newspaper headlines and pasted across the back of our electric bill, which he must have stolen out of our mailbox. I quote: 'Say your prayers, Lionel Standish. You have rode over people for the last time. You will die before the week is out. Yes, before the end of the week?'"

A heavy voice interrupted, "And he'd better hurry. This is

Wednesday and the note came last Thursday."

I looked up at Lionel Standish.

Standish was in his sixties, yet his spare figure stood erect, shoulders back, and his face, although pared down to the bone structure, had a glow of health, and he still had all his hair, iron-gray in color.

He placed a drink before his wife and sat down across from me. "You're Plummer, the private detective, I gather?"

I admitted to being Plummer.

"Not my idea, any of this. Not my idea at all."

"I take it then that you're not worried about the threat?" I said.

Standish blew breath contemptuously through arching nostrils. "If I worried about things like that—Besides, at my age, I can't waste time worrying about death. Do you know how many people die on the dance floor here every year?"

"I have no idea."

"Three last year, all of heart attacks. We who come here aren't young, you know. Milo doesn't publicize the deaths, of course."

He snorted again. "They died happy. That's the point of it all, isn't it, Plummer? Live a full life and die happy?"

I said, "It's a philosophy,

and I suppose it's as good as any."

"At least you don't kowtow, Plummer." His grin was as spare as the rest of him. "I like that in a man. If you want to work with Paula, go ahead. Just don't bother me with it."

"It won't be all that easy without your cooperation."

"That's your problem, isn't it?" He knocked back most of his drink and stood up. "Let's dance, my dear."

The band had swung into "I'll Get By."

Using her left hand, Paula Standish ground out her cigarette in the ashtray and got to her feet. She was almost as tall as her husband. She stepped into his arms, and they moved out onto the floor. Despite the age gap, they made a striking couple, and Lionel Standish danced as gracefully as a man half his age.

The crowd on the floor was somewhat thicker now. I made my way to the bar and ordered a Scotch on the rocks. The bartender was thirtyish, with handsome, closed features, hair worn in a conventional cut without the Afro effect.

"You get a crowd like this every night?"

"About. It varies a little." A neutral voice, no Uncle Tom mushmouth. "The Thirties are big this year, man."

"Yeah. I'm expecting Prohibition back any day."

"I'm ready. I've got a big tub in my pad, all ready for bathtub gin." He bobbed his head at a signal I didn't see. "I'll be back before you finish that."

He ducked under the bar briefly, then left through the lift gate, towel draped across his arm. He disappeared into the crowd in the direction of the bandstand. I looked around for Standish and his wife and finally spotted his erect back before the bandstand.

I worked on the drink, busy with my thoughts. It wasn't going to be an easy assignment guarding a man like Standish. It would require a close watch twenty-four hours a day, and I knew he wouldn't go for that. The only hope I had was finding the sender of the note, and that seemed pretty hopeless within the time limit...

A shrill scream rose above the babble of voices and the music. I spun about and plowed my way through the mob. Just before the bandstand people were shrinking back in horror, leaving a cleared space. The music didn't stop abruptly but dribbled off, an instrument at a time.

Paula and Lionel Standish stood close together, swaying slightly as though dancing in place. His arms were draped

around her shoulders, hanging limp and straight down, his face nesting in the crook of her neck. The handle of an ice pick protruded from his own neck, looking every bit like a terminal growth.

The black bartender stood a few feet away, frozen, towel fallen to the floor. With the exception of the Standish couple, everyone stood perfectly still now, as though a film had stopped at a crucial moment of action.

Then, all at once, the tableau shattered. The bartender took a step toward them. So did I. Standish started to slide to the floor. And Paula screamed again.

By the time I reached him, Standish was stretched out on the floor. Kneeling beside him, I searched for a pulse and found none. There was only a little seepage of blood from the wound around the ice pick.

"Is he dead?" a hoarse voice asked.

I got to my feet. "Dead enough."

"That's all I need, another heart attack this soon. The relatives always blame me and want to sue."

Milo Rampage was tall, dark, dapper, and cultivated the Thirties gangster prototype image. Evidently it gave his middle-aged patrons a thrill

reminiscent of the speakeasy days.

I said, "No heart attack this time. Standish was murdered."

"You're putting me on!" His voice came out a squawk.

"Careful of the cool image, Milo."

"Do you know what a murder could do to my business?"

"I'd think it would double it."

He squinted shrewdly. "You know, you could be right, like an accident drawing a crowd. Say ain't you a peeper?"

He was back in character. I said, "I think you'd better call Homicide. See if you can get Brock Roan. Give him my name; he'll love that. And I'd advise you to seal this place off, keep everybody here until the police get a chance to question them."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll call the fuzz right away." Rampage hustled off, busy as a cat loose in a cage of plump birds.

I turned to Paula Standish, who stood frozen in shock, arms hanging limp at her sides, eyes empty as masked windows.

"Mrs. Standish?"

I could have been whistling in a wind tunnel, for all the reaction I got. I slapped her hard across the cheek.

She still didn't react immediately. Waiting, I thought of



that silly line, "Thanks, I needed that."

Instead she snapped out of it with temper blazing. "Damn you, how dare you!"

She came at me with nails reaching for my eyes. I caught her wrists and spun her around, holding her with my arms locked together in front of her. For a moment she bucked like a wild bronc. Then she went slack, breath escaping her with a sound like a sob.

"I'm sorry, Linc. I'm all right now."

I released her but prudently stepped back out of arm's reach. She turned slowly, rubbing her wrists where I'd held her.

Her glance went to Standish's body. "Is he—"

"I'm afraid so. Can you tell me what happened?"

She shuddered, rubbing her wrists harder. "I'm not sure. We were dancing and he—suddenly grunted something and seemed to stumble. But he kept on dancing for a few steps and I thought nothing of it. Then he sort of slumped down in my arms and I saw the ice pick—"

"Did you see anyone? Any hint at all who did it?"

"No, you saw how crowded it was, like sardines in a can. And I have to confess—" The sound she made was a parody of laughter. "I dance with my eyes closed."

I'D KNOWN Sergeant Brock Roan for years. In fact, we'd played ball one season together in the minors before I'd moved up to the Dodgers, me at first base, Brock behind the plate. He'd never been able to quite hack it. An excellent catcher, he'd never hit over .150 during his three years with the minor league club. He'd finally given up and joined the police.

He was a good cop, with a methodical and dogged mind, an almost photographic memory. He had a quick temper, a rough tongue, and was a sentimental slob underneath.

An hour after his arrival at

Milo's Ballroom with a crew of plainclothesmen, Brock was grumpily questioning a nervous Milo Rampage two tables away. I sat nursing a Scotch, resting my aching knee, the result of an injury that had terminated my baseball career.

Other officers were screening the patrons. They had questioned about half and sent them on their way. So far no one had admitted to seeing the ice pick driven into Standish, and I was sure none would. There were no prints on the pick. The bartender, Henry Carter, had identified it as one of a set of three from the bar.

Paula Standish sat at the table with me. She was out of shock, but she was listless, a soft, sagging look about her, and her eyes had a dull sheen. She had hardly touched the drink before her.

I could hear a part of Brock's questioning of Milo as their voices rose and fell. I wasn't particularly interested. My job was over before it had really begun.

Now Milo's voice rose shrilly. "Sure, he was my landlord, but that doesn't mean I'd—"

The low rumble of Brock's voice interrupted him, and I turned to Paula. "Your husband owned this place?"

She stared at me blankly;

and I had to repeat the question.

"Lionel owned the property, yes. In fact, he owned two blocks here. He was going to tear everything down and put up several office buildings."

"Did Milo know this?"

"He must. Lionel had given out several eviction notices, I know." She shrugged. "Does it matter?"

I switched my gaze back to Milo. He was jumpy, dark face oily with sweat, squirming under Brock's questions.

Paula was speaking. "...want to retain you to find Lionel's murderer, Linc. Please help me."

Looking back at her, I said slowly, "It's in the hands of the police now. It's their job to find killers. They're equipped for it."

"I realize all that, but it can't do any harm to have you work on it. Can it?"

"I suppose not. Not if you feel like spending the money."

"Money will be no problem now. It's all I have left," she said with a twist of bitterness.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean? Nothing, really. I—we wanted children." She gave a small shrug. "We couldn't have any."

"Standish had been married before, hadn't he?"

"His first wife died five years ago."

"They had no children either?"

"No."

"Who inherits then?" I asked her.

"As far as I know, I do. Lionel had no relatives." She tossed her head. "That gives me a motive for killing him, doesn't it?"

I didn't answer that. "How did you meet your husband?"

"I was a private nurse. Lionel had that mild heart attack two years ago. Nothing too serious, but that was when his doctor advised him to at least partially retire. I was hired as his nurse for a few months. At the end of that time Lionel asked me to marry him." Her voice caught. "He said that way he wouldn't have to hire another nurse if it happened again."

Brock approached our table. Paula stood up. "May I go home now, Sergeant?"

He rubbed a hand across the beard stubbling his square jaw and said mildly, "I don't see any reason why not. You've told me everything?"

"Everything."

"You run along then. I'll probably want to talk to you later."

"I'll send you a retainer, Linc," Paula said, and left.

Brock sat down with a weary sigh. "She hire you?"

"Yeah. Any objections?"

"Why should I object? It looks like I can use all the help on this I can get. Just keep me filled in."

"Nothing so far?"

"Not a damned thing." He made an angry sound. "You'd think with a man murdered before two hundred witnesses—"

"Nothing from Milo?"

"Not much. Standish was his landlord. He wasn't happy about the thought of this building being torn down. You think a man would murder for that?"

"People have killed for less, Brock."

He grunted, and we sat in silence for a moment. The detectives had concluded questioning all but a half dozen of the patrons. I finished my drink and glanced toward the bar. Henry Carter was still there.

"Did you question the barkeep?"

Brock looked at me sharply. "Not yet. You know something I don't?"

I told him about Carter leaving me at the bar only a minute before the murder and about my finding him a few feet away from Standish. "The ice pick came from the bar, and he could have hidden it under

the bar towel draped over his arm."

"Let's get him over here then."

He beckoned to one of the detectives and told him to send Carter over to the table. Carter took his time, neither dallying nor hurrying. When he finally reached our table, there was an air of controlled hostility about him. Brock motioned to a chair, but the bartender chose to stand.

"I understand you left the bar unattended shortly before Standish was killed," Brock said. "Why?"

"Someone called me out onto the floor."

"Who?"

Carter's lips tightened. "Standish."

Brock grunted. "What did he want?"

"I never found out. I never reached him."

Brock exhaled noisily. "You expect us to believe that? Do you really?"

"I can't help what you believe, cop," Carter said softly. "That's the-way it is."

Brock studied him thoughtfully for a moment. "Did he ever do that before, call you off the floor?"

"Often. Standish was an impatient cat. He usually wanted a fresh drink waiting for him when a dance ended."

"And you left the bar unattended, just like that?"

Carter shrugged. "He was the Man."

"I thought you worked for Milo Rampage?"

"Milo just runs the place," Carter said, lip curling in contempt. "Standish owned it."

I played a hunch. "Do you live close by, Carter?"

His glance jumped to me. "In the next block."

"The thing is, Standish owned a lot of property around here, and he was tearing it all down. He was handing out eviction notices. Did you get one?"

"I got one."

"That meant a lot of blacks, yourself included, would be left without a place to live."

"So?"

"So, that could give you a motive for killing Standish."

He laughed soundlessly, "You're something else, man!"

"That doesn't answer my question."

"What question?" He grew still. "If you think I jabbed Standish, it's up to you to prove it, Charlie. Otherwise, get off my back!"

THE NEXT morning, in my office on Sunset Boulevard in Echo Park, I made good use of a private cop's best friend, Ma Bell. The first call I made was



to Paula Standish. "I need a couple of names, Paula. Your husband's doctor and his attorney."

She gave me the names, and I jotted them down.

"I haven't mailed your check yet, Linc, but I'll do it today. I'm going down to the ballroom this afternoon. Milo Rampage called. He's uptight about the place being torn down and wants to see me. I agreed to drive down and talk to him. I thought maybe it'd keep my mind off—"

"You can bring the check with you, Paula. I'll see you there. I want a few words with Milo myself."

I called the lawyer first. I wormed a few facts out of him. Standish's wife was the chief legatee, with a few other minor bequests. And plans for razing his downtown property hadn't just been a dream. Standish had already let contracts to two demolition firms.

I had to bully the doctor, finally threatening to call the police into it, before I got anything from him. Except for the heart attack, Standish had been in reasonably good health for his age, in some ways, better than a man twenty years younger.

"Why didn't he ever have children, doctor? Can you account for that?"

"I don't see what that has to do with—"

"Doctor, the man was murdered. The more I learn about him, the better chance I have for finding his killer."

"But I still fail to understand. Oh, all right!" he snapped. "I don't know as I can account for it, as you put it. But his first wife did have three miscarriages. After the last, Mr. Standish was warned that another could well be fatal."

After a few more questions, I thanked him and hung up. I sat for several minutes, deep in thought. Then I called Brock. He had nothing really new. He had discovered that Henry

Carter had exchanged a few heated words on a couple of occasions with Standish concerning the people due to be evicted from the apartments.

I did some more hard thinking, then made another brief call to Standish's doctor.

It was a little after five when I reached Milo's Ballroom. There was already somebody in the ticket box, and the door was unlocked. The interior was dim.

Milo Rampage came to meet me, then stopped short with a gesture of disgust. "Oh, it's you, peeper."

"I see you're not missing a chance for a buck, Milo. I'm surprised you don't have 'See Where Lionel Standish Died' spelled out on the marquee."

"What do you want from me?" he asked aggrievedly. "I have to make it while I can, I'll be out in the street soon enough. Besides, it was your idea."

"Not exactly, but pass it."

I went down the room. The seats along the walls were vacant, the bandstand was also empty, and a man in dingy coveralls was running a polisher over the hardwood floor. Paula sat at the same table as the night before, staring down into a half-finished drink, and Henry Carter was polishing glasses behind the bar.

Paula glanced up as I sat down. "Hi, Linc. I have your check here." She reached for her purse.

"It can wait," I motioned to Carter. "I can use a drink."

"Have you learned anything?"

"I've picked up a couple of things. Not sure where they fit yet."

Carter approached with a glass on a tray. "Scotch on the rocks. Right, Mr. Plummer?"

"Right."

I watched him place the drink before me. He still had his back up, bristly as a porcupine. Milo hovered nearby, ear cocked.

I tasted the drink. As Carter started to turn away, I said, "I understand you had words with Standish over the eviction notices?"

He looked at me stonily. "I guess you could say I had words with the dude."

"He threatened before witnesses to have you fired, I understand."

"You think I killed him over this Mickey Mouse job?" His laughter grated. "I can walk up the street and get another just like it."

"You probably could at that." I looked past him at Milo. "But it's not going to be all that easy to re-locate Milo's Ballroom, is it, Milo?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He advanced menacingly. Carter stepped back, pausing behind him, listening with a slight smile on his face. The man in coveralls was approaching, the polisher moving back and forth in lazy swipes.

I said, "It means you had an even stronger reason for killing Standish, losing your happy home. You had access to the ice picks, and you're always circulating on the floor."

One hand darted under his coat and came out with an automatic. "No damned peeper is going to pin this rap on me!"

"Milo, Milo," I said chidingly. "You've been seeing too many gangster movies on the late, late show." I got to my feet and started toward him, my hand out. "Give me the gun, Milo, before somebody gets hurt."

"Stop right there!" He had to raise his voice above the sound of the polisher, which was right behind him now. "I'll shoot. Don't think I won't!"

I halted. I saw Carter reach out and take the polisher from the man in coveralls. The bartender looked at me, eyebrows raising. I nodded slightly. He aimed the polisher at Milo and let it go.

I said, "Watch out, Milo!"

"You must think I'm an

idiot," he snarled, "to fall for a gag as old as that!"

I shrugged slightly. "Have it your own way."

The polisher buzzed toward him, domestic as a science fiction robot, its bumper striking Milo on the ankles. Milo yelped and jumped to one side, half-turning. I took two quick steps and chopped the edge of my hand across his wrist. The gun clattered to the floor. I scooped it up, dropped it into my pocket, then led Milo to the table.

"Now sit there and behave."

Rampage sat, glowering darkly at me.

As I sat down across from him, Paula leaned forward, some animation in her face. "Linc, did he—"

I sighed. "No, Paula, he didn't kill your husband."

"Then who did? Do you know?"

"I talked to the lawyer and the doctor, Paula. From the lawyer I learned that you inherit the bulk of your husband's estate."

"But I told you that!"

"From the doctor I learned that your husband's health was fine, aside from the heart condition. He wasn't sterile, for example." She started to speak, and I stopped her with an upraised hand. "You see, what threw me off from the start was

that I, and Brock too, tried to make it too complicated. Who was the most obvious person to kill him? You, of course. You were the closest to him, you had on gloves, and you wore long sleeves, making it easy to hide the ice pick. You're as tall as your husband was, and you're lefthanded, both of which you'd almost have to be to carry it off successfully."

On the table her left hand jerked, then was still. She regarded me steadily. "You seem to have forgotten one thing. What was my motive? Lionel's money? All I had to do was wait for another heart attack. Surely the doctor told you that."

"But that's it. You couldn't wait. He was going to divorce you."

Her eyes widened. "You must be out of your mind! If the lawyer told you that, he lied!"

"Not the lawyer, the doctor. Though not in so many words. What would a man like Standish, with a vast fortune, knowing he was as near to death as the next tick of his heart, want most in life? Children, especially a son to carry on after him. I'm sure that's why he married you. Paula, it's you who can't have children. That's what the doctor told me, not that

Standish was divorcing you. But he was, wasn't he? That's why you killed him. You thought here, with a crowd around, and the people here hating him—"

Her mouth formed what could have been a sneer. "If all you say is true, why did I hire you?"

"That was cute. Too cute, the way it turned out. You thought it clever to hire me to protect your husband, thinking that would throw suspicion away from you. Then, after you killed him, you were afraid to fire me. What excuse could you give? And your original reason was still good. Who would suspect a killer of hiring a detective to find him out?"

Paula leaned across the table toward me, her face ugly. On the table top her hands were claws.

I tensed, expecting her to reach for my eyes. Then her glance went past me, and her face sagged into empty lines of defeat.

Getting to my feet, I saw Brock Roan coming toward me. "You're late, Brock."

"Damn it, Linc! I had to check it out for myself!"

I jerked my thumb at Paula Standish. "I think she'll tell you all you need to know now."

I went past him, weariness pulling at me. I felt a tiny nudge of regret at the thought of that uncashed check in Paula's purse.

Just before I reached the door, I met two fiftyish ladies, all gussied up. They skidded to a halt, quick smiles blooming.

I tipped an imaginary hat and said gravely, "Have fun, ladies," and went on out.

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THIS MAN MUST DIE

A good man was gone, blown to pieces along with the guilty secrets he knew. The man in the chair said, "He was our buddy, Mister. You find his killer—or we damn well will!"

by JACK WEBB



AT PRECISELY quarter until ten Tuesday morning, James Edward Walton stood before the Beverly Plaza and asked for his car, an Avon-rental current-model Cadillac.

At 9:45, he tipped the young man who delivered it and slipped behind the wheel. He laid the black leather folio on the seat beside him. The neat gold monogram on the corner of the case made a puzzle of the three letters, CCB. The initials,

and the monogram in particular, stood for Constitutional Civic Bank.

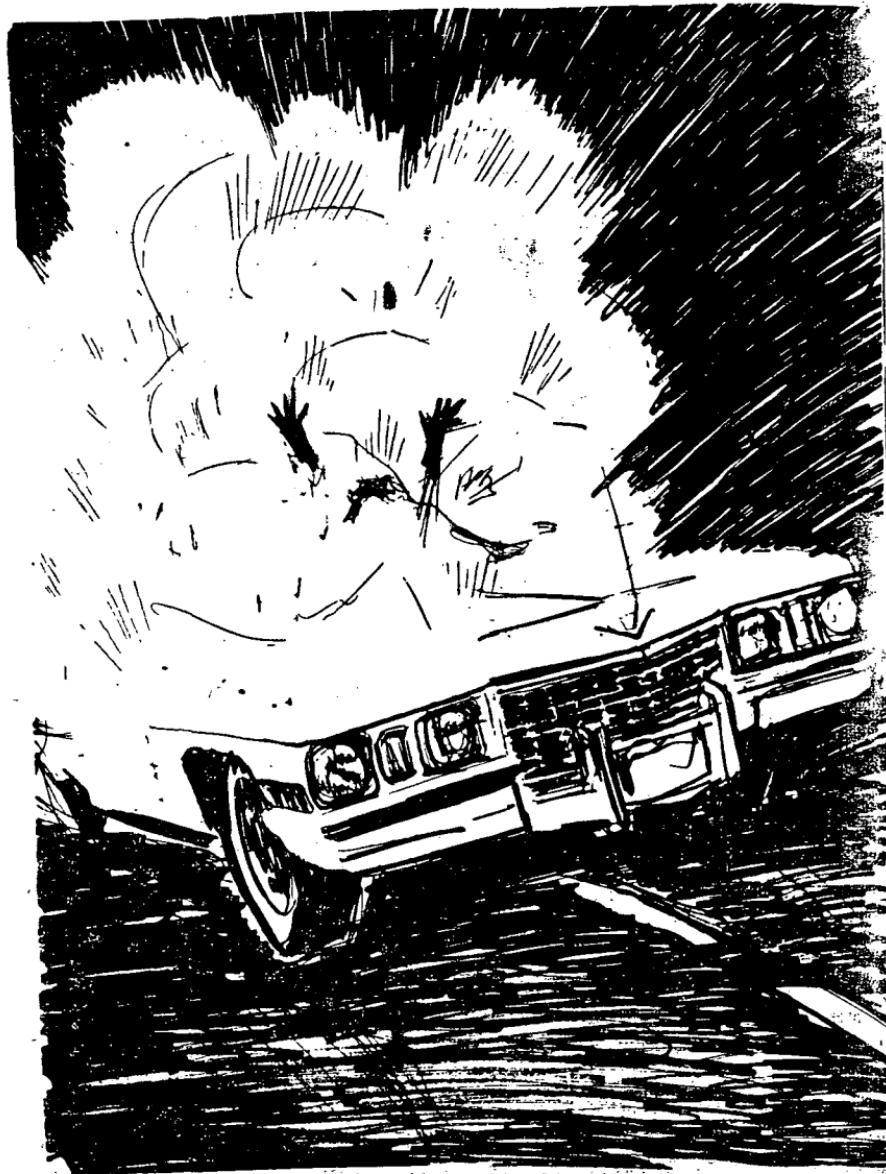
At 9:55, he turned off the freeway and onto a surface road that led immediately to Wilshire Boulevard.

At 9:57 the Cadillac, the man and briefcase blew to pieces.

James Walton was dead.

So were many others who never even had heard his name. There were also many injured.

A New Short Novel of Unbearable Suspense



As meaningless and senseless as it all was, it had to be as irresponsible and ruthless attack against *The Establishement* as any on record in a city where there had been many such incidents.

After all, Walton was, or more accurately, had been, vice president of the CCB.

One individual, before most every other, knew this was a ridiculous assumption. His name was George Henry Thompson and he was chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Amacron Metals. He decided, earlier than most, what had happened when the world blew up half a block beyond and two hundred feet below the penthouse suite of the Baker Building.

As he said to Miss Kuhar when James E. Walton was twenty minutes late for a highly important appointment, "Will you please find out what happened at the corner?"

With eleven years of service to the senior vice president, president, and eventually chairman of the board, Miss Kuhar was not likely to fail.

When she returned, her report was succinct and entirely without frills. Unlike most of the rest of the five floors in the Baker Building occupied by Amacron Metals corporate offices, she had not become

emotionally involved in the human circumstance of a bloody shambles.

"Margaret Morrison," she reported to Mr. Thompson, "was coming in late. She had been excused for an emergency dental appointment. She saw a grey Cadillac turn the corner and then disappear. It blew up."

"Thank you, Miss Kuhar," Mr. Thompson said. "Will you ring me the Beverly Plaza, please. Get me the general manager."

It took just seven minutes for George Thompson to discover that James E. Walton had indeed rented a grey Cadillac from Avon, the executive car rental service.

"Damn!" Thompson said. "Will you get me Jason Billingsly at CCB in San Francisco?"

Miss Kuhar did.

The president of Constitutional Civic Bank confirmed Thompson's worst fears. So far as was known, the only copy of Walton's report had been in Walton's briefcase.

"It was precisely as you ordered," Billingsly said. "Walton did all the work, separated the research elements and destroyed all contributing reports."

"Damn!" George Henry Thompson said again. "Of all

the damned stupid procedures I ever heard of!"

"You were most emphatic," Billingsly said imperturbably.

Thompson restrained himself with an effort.

"Jas," he said, "this is a hell of a mess. Incidentally, my sincere condolences on the loss of Walton. He was an exceptional man."

"But you're not certain," Billingsly said, wavering momentarily.

"Of course, I'm certain," Thompson snapped. He cradled the phone.

"I want to know," he said to Miss Kuhar, "the name of the officer in charge of the investigation of the explosion. I want him to attend me at his earliest convenience. You may tell him that I have information relevant to his investigation."

George Henry Thompson got out of his chair and strolled to the window. He did not look at the Gordian knot of traffic below or the total confusion at the corner beyond. He saw mines in Chile, two-hundred million dollars down the drain; he saw twenty million dollars annually in exploration and research, bleeding the life blood of his company; he saw executive suites in Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver, New York. He saw the now nonexistent Walton report.



Lieutenant Mervin Schwartz, Los Angeles Police Department, came to see George Thompson at two o'clock. He saw a slim white-haired figure all put together with steel springs and wire and three-hundred dollars worth of custom tailoring. He said, "I'm sorry to be so late. I understand you have some information for me."

Thompson said, "May I ask a question first? In your examination of the affair, was there a briefcase discovered by any chance?"

"I don't understand," Schwartz said slowly.

"Jim Walton," Thompson said, "was bringing me confidential information of extreme importance to the company. It is most essential that I discover if that information has been preserved."

Schwartz said, "So far as I now, the victim's name has not been released. As a matter of fact, we only learned it for certain this afternoon. You called the department before eleven. We also have had a rather surprising call from the Constitutional Bank in San Francisco. Are you responsible for that?"

"I suppose I am," Thompson said irritably.

"Maybe you better tell me," the lieutenant suggested.

Thompson glared at the police officer. "Jim Walton was due here at ten o'clock this morning. When he didn't appear, following an obvious catastrophe, I sent my secretary to investigate. One of our employees coming in late saw an automobile blow up at the corner. She was observant enough to report it was a grey Cadillac. I had my secretary call the Beverly Plaza and I was able to ascertain the kind and color of rental car Jim Walton had secured."

For long seconds, Lieutenant

Schwartz stared at the chairman of the board. Finally, he said, "I would like the name of the employee who witnessed the accident. I also would like to know why the information he was carrying invited murder? By whom? Who would have gained by the destruction of that information?"

Thompson snapped. "A great many."

"I'm investigating murder," Schwartz told him. "One with a motive apparently, plus seventeen random deaths. God knows how many injuries. Also property damage, maybe a quarter million, more. Don't get fancy with me, Mr. Thompson."

Thompson stared at him coldly. "We are not responsible for that," he said.

"Somebody is," Schwartz suggested.

II

THE NEXT day, Wednesday, at the corporate offices of Amacron Metals was pure hell.

Joyce Kuhar knocked on his door at three that same afternoon.

Thompson raised his head without speaking.

"A Mr. Jeremiah Jones to see you, Mr. Thompson. He says he's president of Greenbelt Enterprises and that he wants

to talk to you about James Walton."

"Who in hell," George Thompson demanded characteristically, "is Greenbelt Enterprises?"

Miss Kuhar said, incredibly but predictably, "The firm is in hydroponic agriculture. Its sales were three million last year. CCB says they're solid."

"And Mr. Jones wants to talk about Walton?"

"So he says," Grace Kuhar admitted inscrutably.

Thompson stared at her suspiciously.

"Show him in."

"Yes, Mr. Thompson."

He watched her go, both curious and alert. Curious because of the combination of Walton and hydroponics; alert because Miss Kuhar was onto something she hadn't said.

Then, she opened the door wide enough for Mr. Jones to wheel his own transportation into the room. Even in a wheelchair, he was one of the biggest black men Thompson ever had seen.

For a long thirty seconds, they stared at each other. Miss Kuhar withdrew discreetly without a change of expression. *Damn her, Thompson thought irritably, she's enjoying this!*

Finally he said, "Miss Kuhar informed me you are here because of Jim Walton."

"He was murdered," Jeremiah Jones said, "because of something he was bringing to you."

"Nonsense," the older man snapped.

"Amacron Metals is in trouble," Jones said evenly. "That's no secret. When your Chilean investment was confiscated, you lost half your annual profit. You skipped your last dividend. The nonferrous market is lousy. Your stock has slipped. When things like that happen, if you're smart, you call in a doctor. Jimmy Walton was just about the best surgeon there is. Only somebody didn't want the patient to recover. That's the way we read it, Mr. Thompson, and we aim to find out who that somebody is."

"We," Thompson grasped at the obvious straw. "Who in the hell are we?"

"Friends of Jimmy. We did some talking last night. We just think we might catch this cat in places the police might never even look."

"Would you please make some sense, Mr. Jones?"

"Ten years ago," Jones said gently, "on Sunday, the thirteenth of October, one of the boys from Green Bay hit me while I was still in the air. It was all perfectly legitimate, you understand. I had caught the pass. Only something happened

on the way down. That's why I'm sitting here the way I am. But that's not why I'm also sitting here as the president of my own company. Jimmy Walton did that."

"He advised you." Thompson suggested tentatively.

"That he did," Jones agreed, "but the thing you have to understand, Mr. Thompson, is that he also threw that football and I didn't let go of it until they had to carry me off the field."

Thompson was startled. "I had heard Walton had been quite an athlete in his day. But professional football?"

"For five years. Enough time to bankroll him to what he had in mind." Jones said, "but in those five years, he made a team of us. Something a whole string of coaches and the front office hadn't been able to do in twice the time. Also, he kept after us when we got injured like I did, or when we got over-age-in-grade. There aren't very many on what was Jimmy's team who ever went on welfare."

"We owe him a debt. We aim to pay it. Like I said, we talked last night. Some of us together here in town. Others on the phone. We know a lot about your company, Mr. Thompson. We aim to know a lot more. We'd like to know more about

what just was in Jimmy Walton's report."

"But I've never seen the report," Thompson said. "He and the report were one of a kind. They were both together. That's why it was the way it was."

"Surely," Jones said slowly, "there is a copy somewhere."

Thompson didn't like this. Being on the spot wasn't a condition he wasn't used to. There was a relentless strength in the cripple facing him, like facing a caged tiger with other tigers behind him.

He said, "I've talked to Walton's bank. He had followed my instructions precisely. Research elements of the report were generated separately. The parts were put together by Walton, himself. It was important not to alarm any element of Amacron. Not yet."

"But you know none of the contents?"

"None." George Thompson had a sudden thought. "If you can put that report together again, you and your team, I'll pay you ten thousand dollars."

"Why?" Jones asked.

Thompson said. "I've given thirty-five years of my life to this company. It is almost as though it is my company. It has a sickness. But it can be cured. Do you understand?"

"It caused Jimmy's death."

"Come to me first," Thompson said.

"You, and you alone?"

"That's right."

"You are not the president of Amacron."

"I am," Thompson said, and his voice was as tight as a wound spring, "executive officer and chairman of the board. I can take recommendations from the report to the board of directors. Recommendations that might even include the president."

"I see," Jones said softly.

He swung his chrome chair and wheeled away.

My God, Thompson thought, he is a big man. He also thought of the others, Jim Walton's team. Ten, twenty, how many? All big men, all muscular, improbable animals on the trail of Jim Walton's murderer—a kind of conglomerate private detective the world had never seen.

The door closed behind Jones. These were dangerous amateurs, but amateurs they were. Thompson touched the button for Miss Kuhar.

Grace Kuhar opened the door as impersonal as ever. Thompson almost hated her. The emotion was momentary. He was helpless without her.

"That thing with Bigsby last June," he said, "we hired a private detective agency?"



Surprisingly, those perfect, usually immobile features registered distaste.

"Security, Incorporated," Miss Kuhar said, "a Herman Gosham."

"Will you get him for me, please?"

III

JEREMIAH JONES did not return to Greenbelt Enterprises. He went to the Erasmus Club on Figueroa in downtown Los Angeles.

Scat Flanagan met him in the lobby. "We've been waiting for you, Prophet."

"There were some funny things," Jeremiah Jones said.

He rolled swiftly toward the alcove that held the bank of elevators. Flanagan kept pace.

They moved into the elevator together. On the fifth floor, in a private dining room, giants were waiting. The midget among them stood five-ten and weighed one-hundred-and-ninety pounds.

"Hi, Tiny," the Prophet said, grinning.

"You're not as tall as I am," Tiny Svensen said, "not now that you've been cut down to size."

Joe Kowalski shook Jeremiah Jones' hand, then he held out the big palm open to Svensen.

"Don't get your egg head in it," he suggested.

"So tell us about Thompson," the Dutchman said.

Flanagan glanced at the waiter hovering over the wet bar.

"Let's all have a drink first," he said to Schultz.

"In other words," the Dutchman said slowly, "we want to keep this to ourselves."

Scat Flanagan agreed. "Have a drink and talk about ourselves. We've got some catching up to do. To know what we are and where we fit in."

Jones rolled over to the bar, "Jack Daniels, a double." The waiter-cum-bartender nodded.

Jones rolled on. He took a place at the corner of the table.

Scat Flanagan followed, bringing two drinks. They talked quietly until the long table was full, nineteen in all, not bad for the Buc's team of '62.

The Prophet said, "As most of you know, I run a farm out near Blythe. We call it a corporation and we do pretty well. I'm only talking first so I can suggest that I'd be happy to bankroll a part of any expense that may be involved."

Flanagan nodded. "I'm with Jones on that. Like the prophet, here, I've my own company because of Jimmy. One thing more, I've got a daughter in CCB. I talked to her last night. She admits there just might be some leaks where the Amacron Metals was concerned. Some jerks who hated Jimmy because he was like us, only tougher and smarter."

"And deader," Schultz said.

"That's why we're here, Dutch."

"Sure," the Dutchman said. "Only I ain't a millionaire farmer and I don't own a contracting company. I work for a living."

Scat Flanagan said, "Maybe we should talk about take-home pay. You want to put it on that level?"

Schultz shrugged.

Scat Flanagan continued, "Dutch runs the concessions at San Anselmo. Thompson's a member of the Turf Club there, so are a number of his other officers.

"How about you, Tiny?"

"DDS," Tiny Svensen said, "Direct Data Services. We furnish software packages to some of Amacron departments, also a number of realtime terminals to their central data bank."

"What he means," Jones said, "is that Tiny has Amacron in the palm of his hand."

"No sir!" Svensen said quickly. "Not even for Jimmy am I going to spend the rest of my life in jail."

"But," Flanagan said quietly, "you could see if anybody else has been tampering with your system."

"Impossible!" Tiny Svensen said.

"Or any cross ties from the Amacron system into CCB."

"My God!" Tiny Svensen exploded. His blue eyes were bleak. "How would you know a thing like that?"

Kowalski spoke up. "I'm here," he said, "because Jimmy's dead, blown up in the middle of the street. We're going to get the bastard who did it. That's what you said. What can I do about that?"

Scat Flanagan grinned at him

briefly. "Where did you fly in from, Pollak?"

"Tucson."

"What do you do there?"

"Sell Red Dogs. I've the distributorship, Arizona-New Mexico."

"What are Red Dogs, Joe?" Flanagan asked him.

"Hell, Scat, who are you fooling? Tractors, earthmovers, offroad equipment."

"Who's your biggest customer, Joe?"

"Jesus Christ!" Kowalski said.

"How's business?"

"Lousy," Kowalski said. He was thinking of Amacron Metals.

Tiny Svensen said suddenly, "You've got me worried, Scat. You're asking all the questions, all smart, like you know what we, what you're doing. This business about us handling Amacron and CCB. How would you know that?"

"Who handles my payroll, Tiny?"

"We do."

"And when you sold me on your firm, you didn't mention other customers?"

"Oh, hell!" Svensen said, "I'm sorry, Scat. I guess we're all up tight."

Flanagan said, "Tiny's right, you know. Let's all have another drink."

The waiter came from

behind the bar. He took nineteen orders.

"When you have served us," Flanagan told him, "you may leave. Then you can return and serve lunch in thirty minutes."

He said to his guests, "I've ordered prime rib, rare, for everybody. It'll save a lot of time, maybe even get us into the shape for our first team practice."

While they were waiting, Jeremiah Jones said, "When Scat asked me to start the action, I asked myself, why me? Then, I knew." His grin was large, almost ferocious. "Because I'm big and black," he told them. "Because I ride around in a shiny chrome wheel chair. Me, up against the chairman of the board and the chief executive officer.

"Scat's smart, gentlemen, smartest sonofabitch short of Jimmy. That's why we're here." The Prophet shut up and accepted his drink.

The waiter left finally and the special team went into action. As George Thompson had remarked to himself earlier in the day, a kind of conglomerate private detective.

IV

GEORGE THOMPSON, chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Amacron

Metals, stared at Herman Gosham of Security, Inc. and was neither confident nor secure. The imposing figure of black, immaculate Jeremiah Jones imprisoned in that shining wheel chair kept getting in the way.

"You say," Herman Gosham repeated, "that this crippled black man, an ex-member of a professional football team of the 'sixties upon which James Walton also played, claims that he and other friends of Walton's are going to reveal the murderer?"

Thompson nodded. It was ridiculous to repeat himself.

"And you took it seriously?" Gosham's smile depreciated.

"If you don't," Thompson snapped, "I was a fool to call you."

"Now, now, Mr. Thompson," Gosham said quickly, "of course it was proper for you to be upset."

"I am never upset!"

Herman Gosham backed off, perplexed, moved immediately into the pro-to-pro routine, generally effective on occasions like this.

"Mr. Thompson," he said, "you run Amacron. I am certain you run it very well. For nearly a quarter of a century, I've been running the finest private investigative service in

Southern California. You called me, as you have in the past, because you need a professional service. We would not have survived if we did not get results. I'm here to make certain you get them now.

"The question, it appears to me, is threefold. Do you want us to discover if there is any possibility that the Walton Report or any part of it remains? Do you want us to concentrate on the several identities of this Jeremiah Jones group and what they are up to? Or, as the third alternate, do you wish us to look into both?"

Momentarily, Thompson was mollified.

"Both," he decided.

"Fine." Herman Gosham rose. "I shall keep you informed." He decided to push the advantage regained. "And believe me, sir, for all the imposing bulk of this ex-football player and his friends, they are not in our league."

"Jones," Thompson said bleakly, "is president of his own company. Last year it grossed three million dollars. That is not a figure I would dismiss lightly, not even for someone whom you have described as a crippled Negro."

Herman Gosham departed. In a phone booth on the ground floor, he called the *Times-Herald*. He asked for Charlie



Johnston in the Sports Department.

When Johnston was on the line, Gosham said, "Twenty bucks for the roster of Buc players 1957-1962. Walton was quarterback. There was also a pass receiver named Jones."

"Easy.. You want to wait?"

"Call them into my office," Herman Gosham said.

When he left the booth he was not smiling. The phantom team, he thought, would not be difficult. Some leg work, that was all. Then a little looking around to find out what had happened to the bums. Charlie Johnston could take of most of that.

This Walton report, Gosham paused, that was something else again...

On Thursday, in Tucson, Arizona, Joe Kowalski, Red Dog distributor for the Southwest took Stu Emerson to lunch. Emerson was Amacron's purchasing agent for Brass Mountain Mines. He had warned Kowalski there was not even the possibility of a *Minicat* sale. Kowalski had suggested they drown their sorrows together...

On Thursday, in Los Angeles, California, Scat Flanagan invited George Thompson to lunch at the Erasmus Club. The combination of a name like Scat and a club like the

Erasmus intrigued Thompson, but he told Miss Kuhar she was acting ridiculously to transmit such an intitation, and of course, the answer was No!

"Not even thank you," he barked into the intercom.

A moment later, Miss Kuhar interrupted him again, "Mr. Flanagan asks me to tell you that he is from the team of 'sixty-two, that he does own ten-thousand shares of Amacron common, and he has reason to believe the Walton report wasn't quite as secret as Mr. Walton and Mr. Thompson might have wished."

"God damn!" Thompson shouted.

The luncheon was arranged for two o'clock. George Thompson set the late hour. A noontime meal at the Erasmus could be, in the chairman's select circle, entirely too public...

On Thursday, at San Anselmo, Dutch Schultz; made a casual, almost merciless, inspection of the concessions for which he was responsible. Then reasonably satisfied that everything was in hand—except perhaps for the performance of a waitress named Betty in the Turfside Bar & Bite—Schultz turned to his other friends in authority. Particularly, Henry Johnson who was in charge of the betting windows and all the

people and paramutual machines behind; Eric Marx who was chief of security; and Fran Marchant was *maitre d'* at the *sacred* Turf Club, itself.

Dutch Schultz carried four pages carefully clipped from Amacron's last annual report. They contained photos and names of the company's major executives. Those occupying offices at corporate headquarters were circled and underlined. He did not have to say much. His professional associates were all men for whom the breath of scandal had the possible force of a hurricane wind.

He only had to suggest a possible irregularity: Too much betting, too much losing, too much drinking, too much talking, too much withdrawing, too much blonde, brunette or redhead. These men survived on hunches, nuances, instinct. They trusted each other. They were trusted by a great many others not overly given to trusting...

Thursday at noon, Tiny Svensen went home and to bed. He drank four ounces of *Chevas Regal*. He hoped it would help him sleep, a luxury he had not indulged in for twenty-eight hours, not since Scat Flanagan had suggested a leak in the Amacron programs. He took Direct Data Systems seriously,

his machines, his software and his people.

He had found nothing to truly disturb him. Still, he was worried. The interface between Amacron and CCB, a perfectly natural cross-keyed system necessary to both the company and the bank felt soft. Before he went home and to bed, he talked to Bassler.

Bassler was familiar with the general system, not the demand codes.

"See if you can discover them," Tiny Svensen told him.

Bassler stared at him astonished.

"You're an industrial spy. You also happen to be an expert on these machines, hardware and software. See if you can tune in. We should play more war games, you know."

"You serious, Tiny?" The young man's eyes were dancing.

"Deadly," Svensen said soberly.

V

EDIE FLANAGAN was thirty. She had her father's flaming hair, his dangerous blue eyes and her mother's unbelievable petiteness.

That Thursday in San Francisco, she let Howard Plyman take her to lunch without him ever guessing she had managed the invitation. Plyman was assistant to the vice

president, securities and investments. He also had the good fortune to be a great grandson of the founder of Constitutional Civic.

Plyman took Edie to Nicola's. He took her there as much to be seen with her as to enjoy her company. One of the virtues of Nicola's was that you were seen by almost everybody who considered himself anybody.

On his third Manhattan, Plyman was happily spilling Walton's guts. Edie's smile had become fixed. Knee probing knee, Plyman said, "VP, Corporate Affairs. Get what I mean?"

"No," Edie said softly, "I'm afraid I don't."

"Playing God!" Howard Plyman said. "Good old quarterback, trying to play God!"

"Big assignment," Edie Flanagan decided.

"Killed him," Plyman agreed solemnly. "That Amacron thing. Slashing names like names weren't people. Big names. Like Charlie Dawson for Godsake!"

"Charlie Dawson?" Edie drank and spilled a little carelessly.

"Vice President, Exploration. Charlie was my roommate at Vassar." Plyman exploded with laughter.

"Vassar," Edie said seriously, "is a girl's school."

Howard Plyman grinned. Flanagan was as dumb as she was spectacular.

"That's what they told us at Harvard," he told her. He massaged her right knee.

Edie spilled some more of her drink. She spilled it all over Howard Plyman.

Norm told them their table was ready. They had another drink while they ordered.

"Mr. Walton," Edie said tentatively, "he was suggesting somebody fire Charlie? He could do that?"

Plyman nodded. "That's what I told Charlie."

A few moments later, Edie excused herself. She paused at the phone on the wall behind the swinging doors on the way to the restrooms and called her father.

"Honey," Scat Flanagan said. "You're doing fine. See if you can find out how he got a peek at the report, how much. But," he said earnestly, "don't let that half-weaned puppy paw too much."

Edie laughed at her father.

"Don't worry, Scat," she told him.

When Flanagan hung up from his daughter's call, his phone rang again. Miss Breemer said, "I'm holding a call for

you, Mr. Flanagan. It's a Mr. Kowalski, Tucson."

"Put him on, Liz," Flanagan said, and then, "Joe, you got something?"

Kowalski's voice was cautious.

"Maybe," he said to Flanagan, "you scare me a little."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Stu Emerson, it's almost like he's celebrating Jimmy's death."

"Emerson?"

"Purchasing agent, Brass Mountain Mines. It's an open pit operation. With what's happened to copper prices, they've been running scared. Profit contribution to the company low. Big expenses for pollution control certain. Rumors of a report, more than a rumor. A hell of a lot of people seem to have been aware something was going on in Los Angeles. A bank report..."

Scat Flanagan arrived at the Erasmus Club at quarter till two. George Thompson was waiting. The maître D' placed them at a corner table. It was a very private place.

George Thompson regarded the president of a construction company which had grossed fifty million in the past fiscal year with quiet interest.

Flanagan suggested a cocktail.

"I disapprove of luncheon drinking," Thompson said.

Flanagan grinned without humor. "Nevertheless, Mr. Thompson, I suggest we have one now." He stared at the thin, white-haired, whip-strong figure of a man before him with a glance that bordered on admiration. "My friend, The Prophet, told me you were a very solid type. I think our problem is mutual."

"The Prophet?" Thompson was puzzled.

"Jeremiah Jones," Scat Flanagan said. "He was our advance scout."

The waiter hovered.

"A dry Jerez," Thompson said.

"Double Gordons," Flanagan said. "On the rocks, twist of lemon." And then, to his guest, "We're after Jim Walton's murderer. You know that."

"So," Thompson said drily, "is a policeman named Schwartz."

"There are," Flanagan said carefully, "a few facts that Schwartz can't know. That a pipsqueak with a bloodline to the top at CCB warned his college roommate, Charlie Dawson, vice president exploration, that he was on the cutting room floor if the Walton report ever reached you."

Thompson studied the man across the table. A man as big as

the black in the wheel chair had been. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely," Flanagan assured him.

The waiter delivered their cocktails. George Thompson tasted his sherry. He said, "You realize, of course, I have not seen the Walton report."

"None of us have," Flanagan said equitably. "Yet over there in Arizona, Brass Mountain Mines are relieved that *the report* didn't reach you."

"Incredible," George Thompson said. He felt a chill.

Scat Flanagan watched him, reluctantly admiring strength even in a man who had in part been responsible for the death of Jimmy Walton.

Finally, Thompson said, "You and your big friends," he moved his thin, veined hands expressively, "big in frame and muscle and yet you drift like shadows around my company. Do you know what Jim Walton's report means to me?"

Flanagan waited.

And the old man, who only was old in years, said, "Amacron Metals is my company. I was there in Arizona and Mexico and Chile. I was there with the exploration teams who found the mines. I was also there in Montana and Colorado and Peru and Alaska and South Australia. I looked into rare metals and rare earths. I looked

into uranium and the atomic age. I backed us off into copper which is the singing metal, the metal of communication. I looked for more copper in Guerrero when Mexico was more reasonable and got chased out by the bandits.

"I have pulled the world together with copper wire and copper bottomed pots and pans. I have helped man explore the oceans and reach the moon. We became a rich company and fat. Now, the time has come for the fat to be cut. Chile is gone. The nonferrous metals market is down. It will not go up again soon. It is not in the present economy. We can survive, but to survive, we must be lean. Jim Walton and I, we knew that. What we had to do was not a sociable thing."

George Thompson paused, and then concluded, abruptly, "It was my intention to take Walton's report with my unqualified recommendations to the board of directors. Upon their approval, we would have removed a cancer that included more than half of the upper crust of Amacron Metals. It had to be done in complete security."

"Your security blanket," Flanagan said drily, "is leaking like a sieve."

"How?" Thompson demanded. "Only Walton and I knew

what he was to do. Only he knew how he would cut, clean, reorganize. The report was singular. He divided the elements so none of his researchers could relate to one and other. I talked to Jas Billingsly twenty minutes after Walton died."

He caught Flanagan's questioning glance. "Hell," Thompson exploded, "ten minutes after Walton died in the explosion, I knew it had to be him. He was never that late for an appointment."

Scat Flanagan suggested they order lunch. Because they both were civilized men, they ordered carefully and well. When the waiter had departed, Flanagan remarked casually, "From all reports, it was quite an explosion that destroyed Walton."

Thompson nodded. "Ruthless but effective. Easy to destroy a man and a car. A little more difficult to make certain a few sheets of paper wouldn't be blown aside."

"There are people in your company who could design such a charge?"

George Thompson grinned without humor.

"Begin with me," he said. "We are a mining company. We haven't diversified too much into gentler pursuits. You could say, Mr. Flanagan, we're entirely explosive. Given a rich vein,



we have used the same kind of explosive techniques that might have destroyed Walton and his car. The only difference would be the fusing and timing."

The luncheon was concluded at four o'clock.

At four-fifteen, Scat Flanagan was back on the phone to his daughter in San Francisco. Nothing more had emerged from Howard Plyman.

"Jim Walton's secretary?" Flanagan asked before he hung up.

"Liz?" Edie said earnestly, "I think you better forget about her, Dad. When the word came about Mr. Walton, she went all to pieces."

"Honey," her father said, "I'm sure the police have talked to her. We'd like to, too. We have some different angles. If I flew up tonight, would you take me to see her?"

"You, dad?" He could feel the question in her voice. "I don't think so," Edie said finally.

"Why not?"

There was a long pause. "Wrong color," Edie said finally.

"What in the devil do you mean by that?" Scat asked his daughter.

"Liz is black," Edie told him. "Also, she's too up tight to be bullied by a rednecked Irishman."

Flanagan was quiet for one minute. Then, he exploded, "Don't you trust your dad for nothing? I want Liz's full name, address and telephone number. And as soon as I can get him there, she's going to talk to a

friend of yours and mine. And that means tonight!"

Edie said, "Dad, you're wonderful! You do mean The Prophet, don't you?"

VI

AT A LITTLE after five-thirty, Jeremiah Jones picked up a plane in Palm Springs bound for Ontario. There, he changed, to a plane for Oakland. Elizabeth Johnston lived in Berkeley, California.

The highrise overlooked a lake with parkways and trees below. The cab driver helped Jones with his chair in a remote, half-angry way.

He rolled up the walk through the foyer and into the lobby with considerable speed. Opposite the elevators, he picked up a house phone.

"I want Miss Elizabeth Johnston, 608," he said.

"Yes?" The voice on the phone was hesitant, anxious.

"When I played on the Bucs," Jeremiah Jones said, "they called me *the prophet*. Jimmy Walton, he was my quarterback. My name is Jones."

"Yes, Mr. Jones."

"I'm coming up to see you, Miss Johnston."

"Where are you, Mr. Jones?"

"Opposite the elevators," The Prophet told her.

"Oh," said Elizabeth Johnston.

Jones cradled the phone and rolled toward the elevators.

Liz Johnston opened the door on the sixth floor. She was a tall, lean, handsome girl. She wore a knit pant suit that was smoky with metallic highlights and she looked no more regal than that once queen of all Egypt.

Jones rolled past her into a room that looked out through view windows to the bay. There were half a dozen people in the apartment.

Jones swung his chrome chair so he could review the party. A couple looked aggressive. The Prophet smiled at them.

"I'm here to talk to Miss Johnston about Jim Walton," he said. "Miss Johnston and I are going to talk about Mr. Walton. If she wants you here, that's fine. If she doesn't, get out."

A white boy with a beard down to nipples that shown through a thin shirt came over and planted himself before the wheel chair. "And just who in hell do you think you are?"

Jones grabbed the beard and pulled down.

"I am," he said happily, "a man they used to call mean. They used to say I like to hurt people. Maybe, I still do."

Then, he let go of the beard, picked up the aggravated young man by his hips and threw him across the room.

Liz Johnston shouted, "These are my guests!"

"Then," Jones said gently, "let them behave. We're here to talk about a man who was worth the lot of them."

"I'll call the police!"

"Excellent," Jeremiah agreed. "Then you, I, your guests and the police shall sit down together and discuss the report Walton had prepared for Amacron Metals."

Liz Johnston froze. She was like a cat, Jones thought, immobile, tight, expressionless and dangerous.

There was an almost imperceptible sound behind him. Jones spun his chair. The muscular black man held a candelabra, tall, contemporary, fluting metal.

"Come on," Jeremiah Jones said softly, "come on, little brother."

Liz Johnston crumpled.

"Please," she said to the group in her apartment, "will you leave? I'll call you, or something."

"It's really no time for a party," Jones agreed. His voice was bleak.

They left.

"I have lost you," Jones told her, "no friends worth saying."

"Because they couldn't beat you up?"

"Not even in a wheel chair," Jones agreed. "And baby," he added, "they weren't giving me any odds on that."

Liz Johnston snapped, "I'm not used to having primitive Uncle Toms like you making any decisions for me. Who in hell are you to decide my friends?"

"Just nobody," Jones agreed with mock humility, "but one hell of a friend of the late Jimmy Walton."

"Sure," Liz Johnston told him. "Arrogant, relentless, so damned sure of himself his spit must have been sacred. 'Thank you, Miss Johnston. Very kind of you, Miss Johnston. Would you mind, Miss Johnston? I'm afraid we'll have to work a little late, Miss Johnston. On your way back from lunch, Miss Johnston, would you mind stopping at my apartment and packing a bag. And my topcoat. It was three degrees Fahrenheit in Anchorage this morning. I shall have to be in Los Angeles on Friday, will you make reservations at the Century Plaza and will you please find me six tickets for the USC/Stanford game.'"

She paused, out of breath, so angry she was crying. Her eyes were very bright.

"My God," The Prophet said

softly, "you were in love with Jimmy!"

"Love!" The word was an obscenity.

VII

AT TEN o'clock that same evening, Herman Gosham found the finest private detective agency in Southern California in serious straits. To maintain a position of value to George Thompson and Amacron Metals was, at the moment, as likely as sustaining the shape of a snowball in hell. Not only was there little chance of retrieving the Walton report, but the team of football players he had described as amateurs was formidable indeed.

They were in their own fashion, professionals in business, at the racetrack, even in the information business and they touched almost every phrase of Amacron Metals.

Gosham paused. If he couldn't beat them, how could he destroy them? The thought was repulsive, but he liked it. He picked up the phone and called Los Angeles Police Department. He asked for Lieutenant Schwartz.

The lieutenant's tone of voice when it came on the phone was raw, tired. "All right, Herman."

Gosham played it straight.

"George Thompson called me yesterday. Walton's death and the so-called Walton report. You've got some high-price competition, Lieutenant." Gosham paused. "Interested, Lieutenant?"

"Keep talking."

"Ten years ago Walton was quarterback on a professional football team, the Bucs."

"So what else is new?"

"Jeremiah Jones—they call him The Prophet—called on Thompson. Told him Jimmy's friends were going to find out who killed him. Nineteen of them met at the Erasmus Club yesterday afternoon after Jones saw Thompson to plan their strategy. Would you like to have their names?"

Schwartz said, "I'm ready, Gosham."

"You'll remember this favor."

"I'll remember you're not obstructing justice."

Gosham began to recite. Name, present profession, dollars, the lot of it.

"Christ!" Schwartz said finally. And then, "You'll be credited with the information, Gosham."

He hung up the phone. All of the information was on tape. The lieutenant played it back. Jones had been the original thrust. Flanagan was the base. His own men watching Thomp-

son had told him that. Now, for the first time, he knew why these men had been with Thompson. A football team from ten years ago. My God, how could you expect to think of that?

Schwartz picked up his hat and headed for the door. Tomorrow, there would be things to do. There was one thing Gosham had not considered, this team and Schwartz, they might be happy to work together.

At 8:30 the next morning, Lieutenant Mervin Schwartz parked his unmarked car at the curb outside of Flanagan Constructors. The building was a tri-level determinedly casual, determinedly comfortable and unexpectedly attractive. Roof tiles weathered from old buildings Flanagan had wrecked, wrought iron at doors, gates and windows, as much for protection, as for decoration, stucco painted white, olive trees moved full grown, a fountain and king-sized honey suckle all combined with such an impact that even Schwartz thought fleetingly, *I would like to come here sometime and sit in the sun.*

Instead, however, he presented his credentials to the mauve-haired receptionist. "I would like to see Mr. Flanagan," Schwartz said.

"Just a moment, Lieutenant," said Mrs. MacLeod. She took Schwartz's message in person.

On the heels of his receptionist, a big redhead lumbered into the front area. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

Schwartz grinned briefly. "I played against you a couple of times, Mr. Flanagan. In fact, you're the first man or boy who ever knocked me out."

Flanagan relaxed. He shook his head. "You didn't come here to tell me that, but, when—"

"Hollywood versus Hoover High. Homecoming game for us, 1952. I was a left-end. I tried to get in your way."

"My God!" the big man laughed and held out his hand. Schwartz accepted it.

"Look," Flanagan said, "I'm on my way to San Francisco, flying. A friend of mine got himself pinched. He's got his own lawyer. That he can afford. I'm going up because I think he and my daughter have let some light in on Jimmy Walton's death. Jones called on Walton's secretary last night and precipitated a little fracas. My daughter works for CCB."

"Yesterday, she let a minor ass from the bank with family connections take her to lunch. He told her what a bastard he thought Walton was, how he

had warned a college roommate of his that Walton was cancelling him out. Roommate was, still is, vice president, exploration, Amacron Metals. Want to come along?"

Schwartz said, "Can you give me ten minutes to clear here, Frisco? And, what airline are we flying?"

Flanagan laughed again. "My own. We keep a couple of light planes and a chopper at Burbank. Takes a little longer but it's a hell of a lot more convenient. I'll be the pilot."

"Jones, that would be the prophet?"

"Right."

Schwartz stared at Flanagan. "Did Jones go because she was black or because she wasn't?"

"I wanted to go. My daughter wouldn't let me. The girl's black. She didn't put Jones in jail. One of her friends did. He stood up to Jeremiah in his wheel chair. Jeremiah sort of threw him away. The young man claims aggravated assault. Jones is in jail in Oakland, by the way."

"Ten minutes," Schwartz repeated, "where can I have some privacy?"

"My office," Scat Flanagan pointed with a thumb. "Barbara here will place your out-of-town calls. Strictly private."

Alone, Schwartz dialed the department. He swung Flana-

gan's chair and stared at the wall of photographs behind the desk. Big young men, strong. What else? Ruthless, that had to be the quality. He picked out Walton.

Captain Harmon came on the phone. Schwartz explained.

"It sounds like a break, Merv," the captain said. "I'll talk to Frisco. Play it careful and keep me informed."

Schwartz agreed. "I'll also want to talk to Oakland, Captain."

Harmon said. "They owe us a favor for the Cousins brothers last month. It's Lieutenant Chandler you'll want up there!"

While the captain hopefully was calling San Francisco, Schwartz asked Barbara to get him Lieutenant Chandler in Oakland. Chandler's description of the young man who had brought charges against Jeremiah Jones was sparse and explicit.

"Jones still with you?"

"Not for long," Chandler said.

"Could you suggest to him," Schwartz said, "that Scat Flanagan is flying into the San Francisco Airport in however long it takes a private plane to get there."

"Why not?" Chandler said.

The plane waiting at the Burbank Airport was a Mitsubishi MU-2J.



Before they took off, Scat Flanagan was called back to the hangar on a telephone call. When he returned, he said, "Tiny Sven sen on the phone. He owns Direct Data Systems. DDS computers handle both Amacron Metals corporate accounting and the interface with CCB. Last night, Tiny put one of his people up to breaking the retrieval codes on both systems. Young man did it in under six hours."

"Undoubtedly," Schwartz suggested drily, "Tiny was on the famous Walton team."

"Five-ten," Flanagan said fondly, "a hundred-and-ninety

pounds with his suit on. Given half a block, he could go through a ten-inch hole."

The tower told Flanagan he could grab the sky.

Brown hills slid away underneath. East of the Rockies, they might have passed for mountains. Here they were a wrinkled lizard skin. It was a rare, clear day for Southern California.

The lieutenant relaxed, thoughtfully.

Scat Flanagan broke into his thoughts. "This thing with Jimmy's secretary, Jones thinks it's a love/hate combination. Jimmy damned near perfect, choosing the machines around him to work the same way. Most often, this doesn't work out. A woman, or a man for that matter, running all the time just to keep up, gets tired, breaks away. You see what I mean?"

Schwartz said carefully, "I think you are suggesting that your Jimmy Walton was something more than human."

"You better believe it," Flanagan said. "What do you think took us from a fifth rate team to the top? What do you think took us from a bunch of college semi-stars to a team that couldn't be beat?"

"Jimmy saw to that. You have to be something more than human to be a pro. If you take

it off the field with you and continue to act as an intelligent machine, there's no stopping you except when you stop yourself."

Schwartz said quietly, "*Thus spake Zarathustra.*"

Flanagan shook his head, "We're not apes, Lieutenant. Neither are we storm troopers. We are simply strong men with direction. Off the athletic field, that is no longer popular these days. You must also know that we are checking up on the betting habits and behavior of Amacron Metal Executives at the most available race course and that we know that Amacron's Brass Mountain Mines Division knew that the Walton Report and Walton had been destroyed long before you announced Walton's death and that a considerable number of people, including the chief purchasing agent, were considerably relieved."

"My God," Schwartz said. He did not broach the subject that his department should have been informed, even though it included one of the three finest police departments in the world. This was a league of amateurs, who had broken no law, save for Jones physically throwing away a punk last night, who were not amateurs at all. A professional football team retired. Retired, my God!

VIII

THE TWIN-engined plane slid down the sky and into San Francisco.

Jeremiah Jones was in the waiting taxi.

"That little son of a bitch," he said to Scat. "standing in my way in her apartment with his fat nipples showing through his sleeveless skiv. I could have broken him to pieces."

Schwartz said, "I'm Lieutenant Schwartz, Jones, Los Angeles Police Department."

Jones glanced at Flanagan who shrugged, making no effort to disguise it.

"I think he's on our side," he said.

Jones held out his hand.

"I am happy to meet you," he said.

Schwartz accepted the hand.

"Likewise, Prophet," he said.

Everybody laughed.

Flanagan said, "We've got a date with my daughter. We're having lunch at Ben Jonson's."

On the way into town, Jones talked. "She's got a good piece of the story," he concluded, "but she didn't tell it to me." He smiled without humor. "Filled her apartment with trash and called me an Uncle Tom."

Lieutenant Schwartz glanced at Flanagan. "If there's time,

I'd like to talk to Miss Johnston. If there isn't, maybe I'd better stay behind."

"Let's see what Edie has to say," Scat Flanagan suggested.

"Your daughter," Schwartz inquired, "can you fill me in, her job, jobs with the CCB. It's a damned big bank. How close would she have been to Walton's secretary?"

"In the club," Flanagan said without hesitation. "Edie is thirty," he continued. "She started down south with the bank nine years ago. Five years ago there was a chance for a promotion if she'd move to San Francisco. Her mother hated to see her go."

Flanagan grinned. "I kicked her upstairs. Six months ago, she became secretary to the vice president, foreign affairs. That put her across the hall from Walton. I don't know how close she was to his secretary except that she warned me yesterday that I wasn't the one to see Miss Johnston."

"One thing, with the young men unmarried, Edie is particularly eligible. I am," Flanagan continued seriously, "a too damned attractive father-in-law." He relaxed, smiling. "I do, however, have a level-headed kid who's never going to be out of pocket money."

Ben Jonson's is one of those come-lately San Francisco res-

taurants which only that town can generate. Edie Flanagan was waiting inside the door, hair, a flame in keeping, figure, perfect; the size, vest-pocket, was a surprise. The genuine affection between her and her father was undoubtable.

They moved upstairs. A seventeenth century restaurant took them to lunch in twentieth-century style.

In the vigor of her concern, Edie attacked Lieutenant Schwartz. What had he done about Uncle Jimmy's death?

He said gently, "We presume James Walton was murdered. We are beginning to realize why. That's why we're here."

Her father helped him off the sputtering griddle.

"Honey," Scat Flanagan said, "I've spent the last two hours with the lieutenant here. He's on our side. He's told Jeremiah what kind of a slug the guy is he threw away last night at Liz Johnston's apartment. What kind of a kook is this Johnston female?"

They were seated in a private alcove and waiting for cocktails.

Edie shrugged. "That one's not easy. On the job, funny. Efficient. Smart, maybe the smartest gal on the top floor, including me. Either adoring Jimmy or on a soapbox. I never had a chance. You see, I was a friend of Jimmy's; you were my

parent. We never made anything of those things, neither Jimmy or I, not in the office. But even when you're the offspring of sports history, you can't escape. Not when you're the daughter, and godchild," she reached and touched The Prophet's hand, "of Jimmy Walton's Numbers One and Two."

"So what else about Miss Johnston, Miss Flanagan?" Schwartz inquired. All murders, he reflected were personal, certainly for those murdered, those murdering, and those affected. But how did you deal with *the family* when it was the Bucs of '62?

The tavern wench brought their cocktails.

Edie returned her attention to the detective's question. "Lately, it's been ecology. Some night courses at Berkeley. Sierra Club. A lot of impassioned ecology. I suspect that's what Jeremiah ran into."

"None of that bunch ever had a sunburn," Jones muttered.

"Of course not," Edie said with a shake of her head. They're a part of the Bambi syndrome, eat wheat germ and fertilized eggs and wait for the world to whirl backwards!"

"Perhaps," Schwartz suggested, "we should talk about Howard Plyman and his friend,

Charlie Dawson at Amacron Metals."

He would have liked to stay with this loose conversation. When you turned people loose emotionally, when they accepted you even for a few short minutes, you learned things almost irrelevantly that were not irrelevant at all.

Edie said, "I think I've told Scat everything I know."

Her father nodded.

The lieutenant agreed, and added, "But I'd like to hear about Plyman and his relationship with Walton before this week. Even for as long as you have been here."

Edie studied the detective. "Jimmy called him a—" she paused and then grinned as she found the word, "—a consanguineous bueracrat."

"That," The Prophet said admiringly, "is truly a mouthful."

"And Mr. Plyman about Mr. Walton," Schwartz persisted.

"Financial gladiator, the brawn of CCB, except when he tried to be clever, it usually came off as a compliment. So generally, it came out, that son of a bitch with tickets on the fifty-yard line."

Scat Flanagan laughed. "A feat your friend Plyman couldn't accomplish."

Edie nodded seriously. "That's true. His boss wanted

some tickets for the Super Bowl a year ago. He suggested to Howard that he talk to Jimmy. Howard would have nothing to do with that. He went to a scalper and paid forty bucks a seat for ten tickets. They were on the twenty-yard line. The guests Mr. Bronson was taking to the game were from the Argentine. Mr. Bronson came storming into Jimmy's office demanding if that was the best he could do for Perez y Seco, S.A!" Edie paused, "Mr. Walton asked Bronson what in hell he was talking about.

"When it all got straightened out, Mr. Bronson had his fifty-yard line tickets and Jimmy and I spent four-hundred dollars of the bank's money, taking eight orphans to the Super Bowl.

"Plyman was forced to admit he never had mentioned the subject to Jimmy. If Howard hadn't been a grandson of the bank's founder, he would have been out on the street."

"Which didn't help the Plyman-Walton relationship," Lieutenant Schwartz suggested drily.

Edie's answer was carefully explicit.

"But," she added earnestly, "as much as I'd like to see Howard Plyman hung by his thumbs, Lieutenant, he didn't murder Jimmy."

"Why?" Schwartz asked.

"He has the guts of an angleworm."

"Which," Jeremiah Jones murmured, "are enormous in proportion to the worm's size." And when they stared at him, astonished, he smiled and said. "Beside hydroponics, which hasn't all the answers, I've been making some investigations on other kinds of agriculture. Put a compost on top and earthworms into the soil and some amazing thing happen, all due to what passes through the earthworm."

"My God," Scat Flanagan said.

Still, it was an excellent lunch. Afterwards, clearing first with the S.F.P.D., Schwartz returned with Edie Flanagan to the Constitution Civic Bank. The ride through downtown San Francisco might have been traumatic had it not been for the proximity of a mini skirt and two perfectly structured legs involved with four-on-the-floor in city traffic.

As they entered the bank, a grey-haired, soft-spoken individual disengaged Schwartz from Miss Flanagan.

"Sergeant Cribaro," he said to Schwartz. He showed his credentials. "Captain Thatcher offers full cooperation. He would like one of us to walk along with you, however. That's



me. Not to get in your way, just to be completely informed, Lieutenant."

The jet eyes were cautious, but not unfriendly. Schwartz showed his own credentials. "Is there somewhere we can talk, Sergeant?"

"Sure," Rudy Cibaro said. He led the way.

Ten minutes later, Cibaro stared at the homicide man with an expression that bordered on disbelief.

"The team of '62," he said softly.

"Nobody with a brain in his head," Schwartz agreed solemnly, "should ever have killed Jimmy Walton." He grinned unexpectedly, "And it's up to you and me, Sergeant, to keep them from going too far. They even scared Herman Gosham. You know him?"

"That slug!" Cibaro's lips curled. "His P.I.'s are a little less welcome in this town than your smog or termites."

"Now," Lieutenant Schwartz said. "Shall we go and have a visit with Mr. Howard Plyman and Miss Liz Johnston? The Flanagan girl tells me she is back to work today."

Cibaro grinned. "It'll be a pleasure to watch you work, Lieutenant."

"You go to hell," Schwartz said. The suggestion was not unfriendly.

IX

HOWARD PLYMAN'S office was impressive—so impressive that the furnishings, at least the decorative elements, must have been supplied from a private pocket. Surely the bank would not have paid for a sixteen-by-twenty of Howard Plyman standing by a giant sailfish at a tropical pier; Howard Plyman and a successful presidential candidate, shaking hands outside the Fairmount Hotel; Howard Plyman and a late senator at Candlestick Park. The furniture was also too large and too rich for the size of the office it occupied.

Schwartz let Cibaro introduce them all to each other.

Plyman leaned his elbows on his immaculate desk, clear of everything but a beautiful set of double gold pens, an in-box and an out-box, and one impressive-looking report in a binder, and said, "Terrible thing about Walton. Walton was important to us here; so is Amacron Metals."

"You knew about the report?" Schwartz asked softly.

"Of course," Plyman said. "All of us with the need-to-know did."

"Need-to-know?" the Lieutenant repeated the phrase carefully. He did not take his

eyes off Plyman. An immaculate young man, thirty-five, thirty-six, blue-eyed, a touch of grey at the temples, beautifully tanned, perfectly tailored, he should have been attractive.

Plyman said seriously, "We are, of course, speaking in confidence. There are millions of dollars involved, a great many people—" He let the sentence trail off.

Schwartz was suddenly bored. "Including Charlie Dawson?"

The result of the question was startling.

The color drained from Plyman's face and then returned three-fold. His hands curled and then pounded on the desk top.

"That dirty little bitch!" he shouted.

Schwartz said carefully, "I should warn you about your remarks, Mr. Plyman. You are in the company of two police officers. You have every right to call your attorney, although we have presented no evidence to suggest you are culpable of any guilt aside from possible defamation of a lady's character."

"What do you mean by that?" Howard Plyman demanded.

"Dawson was informed by you," Schwartz said, "that the division of the company for

which he was responsible was to be cut to the bone. Exploration," Schwartz was guessing, "could no longer support an expensive vice president."

"That's insane!"

"The alleged betrayal of corporate affairs," Schwartz said quietly, "is not police business. The James Walton murder is. We can presume, however, that there might be a possible relationship..." The lieutenant paused.

Plyman flared. "And I called Charlie in Tucson and he flew to Los Angeles and planted a bomb in Walton's rented car at the Beverly Plaza. Now, just how in hell, Lieutenant, would Charlie or I know Walton was staying at the Beverly Plaza, that he was driving a grey Cadillac, that it would be parked in the hotel garage and that we could get to it, providing we could find it?"

"A play by Shakespeare," Schwartz said surprisingly. "Much ado... Undoubtedly, Miss Johnston was aware of Walton's requirements. Undoubtedly, she conveyed them to the girl in your office who takes charge of air reservations, hotel reservations, car reservations. Undoubtedly, a man in Walton's position has pretty set preferences. As far as getting into the garage is concerned, we're looking into that."

"Now, about your relationship with Charles Dawson..." Schwartz stared at his victim bleakly. For all the bluster, it still took more than wishes to put a backbone in a jellyfish...

Jeremiah Jones stirred restlessly. "You know, Scat, I've been doing some thinking."

"You've had plenty of time last night," Flanagan agreed.

"Big help you are," The Prophet said. "Liz Johnston, our little Edie, they're all wrapped up in a big-bank-little-politics. Jimmy, he wasn't killed up here, he was killed down there. I'm going back down there and talk to some more people at Amacron."

"Like who?" Scat Flanagan inquired.

"Like the president of the company," Jones said. "He ain't met me yet."

"Lloyd MacLeod," Flanagan said. "I looked him up when I shipped you off first time. Only then I learned George Thompson really held the reins. From what Thompson told me, even MacLeod might have been under Walton's axe."

"All the better," Jones said. "I'll grab me some wings."

Scat Flanagan walked with him to the door of the club and got him a taxi.

The Prophet slept all the way to Los Angeles. He had not admitted to Scat Flanagan that

he had sat up all night in his wheel chair in the jail at Oakland...

It was five o'clock when Schwartz was through. He had done the bank from Jason Billingsly to Liz Johnston. She had been vitrolic about *Establishment Uncle Tom Jeremiah Jones*. She had broken down under questions about James Walton. Jones had pegged her pretty well, Schwartz thought, on the love/hate syndrome.

The afternoon had been more frustrating than enlightening. Too many at the bank had been aware of too much. Whether they were concerned with the report, whether they had any concern whatsoever with the possible effect of it on hundreds of employees at Amacron Metals seemed less important than being in the know. Certainly, Howard Plyman had passed information on. Undoubtedly, Liz Johnston had been so emotionally involved that she could have done most anything.

The emotional part of it even got under Lieutenant Schwartz's skin. So, he had his final session with the president of CCB and he took Mr. Jason Billingsly and his bank apart.

He told him of Howard Plyman's leak to an Amacron vice president. He told him of Liz Johnston's dangerous emo-

tional unbalance. He told him of the number who had admitted of their knowledge of some part of the Walton report. He did not advise Jason Billingsly what to do about a leaky ship, but he did point out the almost nonexistent security.

The lieutenant left a very shaky president.

Then he flew home with Scat Flanagan, more than a little irritated that Jeremiah Jones hadn't waited.

X

AT BURBANK airport, Scat Flanagan called his office. He returned to Schwartz with a puzzled expression. "Jones and Thompson are waiting for you at police headquarters. Jones says it's urgent."

"You better leave your car here," Schwartz decided.

At the terminal building, he flagged the first police car he saw. The lieutenant, Scat Flanagan, and two members of the Burbank Police Department went to Los Angeles in a hurry. Even on a freeway at peak traffic hours, a red light and a noise maker can be a great help.

Jones rolled forward to meet them as they left the elevator. "Can we talk somewhere quiet for a couple of minutes?"

"What in the devil are you up to, Mr. Jones?"

"I think maybe it's all wrapped up, Lieutenant."

"My office," Schwartz decided.

"Huh-uh," The Prophet said. "That's where they're entertaining Mr. Thompson."

"They're what?" Schwartz snapped.

Jeremiah Jones said softly, "I told Mr. Thompson you'd have important information when you returned from San Francisco. That's how I got him down here, Lieutenant."

Schwartz stared at the very big black man in the wheel chair. He jerked a thumb and Jones and Flanagan followed.

In an interrogation room, he slammed the door. "All right, Jones, give!"

The Prophet said, "Why don't you and Scat sit down, Lieutenant? I don't like talking up to people. Never have."

Flanagan sat down. The silence grew. Schwartz damped an explosion. He sat on a bench usually reserved for prisoners.

"Much nicer," Jones said softly. "Maybe Scat told you," he began. "While we were sitting, waiting for you at the bank, we did some talking. I had talked to Mr. Walton's secretary. Edie Flanagan had revealed Mr. Plyman's release of confidential information to his vice president of Amacron Exploration. Still, I said to

Scat, we were fooling with big-little noises; and Mr. Walton, he was killed down here.

"So, I came back and talked to a Mr. MacLeod. He's president of Amacron Metals."

"We're well aware of that. A number of us have talked to MacLeod, including me."

"That's right," The Prophet agreed easily. "You asked him things. I told him something. That's the difference."

Schwartz was startled. "You told him what?"

"That he had a copy of the Walton report."

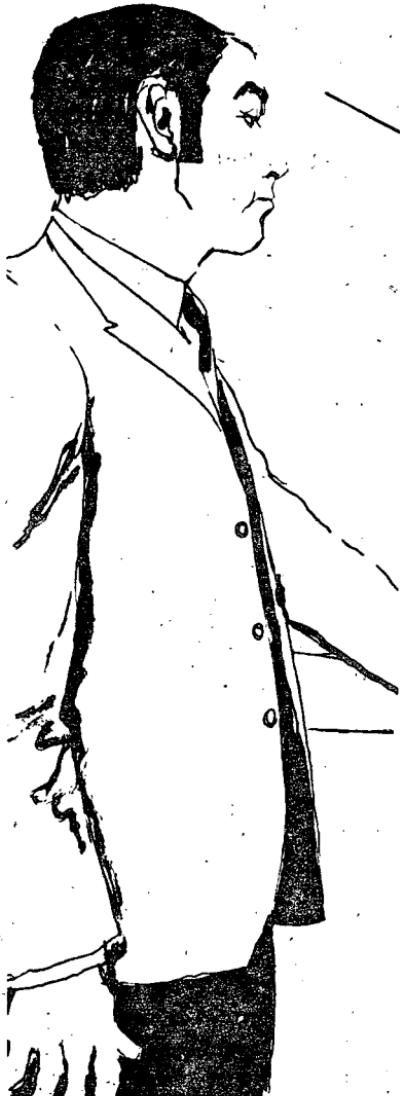
The lieutenant left the question unasked.

"He did," Jones continued. "Eventually, he showed it to me. It had been sitting on his conscience, I think."

"What do you mean by that?"

"MacLeod had nothing to fear from the report. It didn't put the finger on him. Everything Thompson had told you about the report was true. There were no holes barred. Amacron Metals was in real trouble. Many of its operations and much of its executive force needed to be cut back. But MacLeod wasn't the key figure, Thompson was."

"Thompson thought that Amacron was his baby. He was its father and mother. On down the line, he would have agreed



with Jimmy's report. About himself, no. That's why Jimmy delivered the second copy of

the report to MacLeod the night before he was to deliver the original to Thompson. Jimmy's job was to salvage a corporation, not George Thompson."

"My God!" Scat Flanagan said softly.

"The report?" Schwartz said.

"You or any of your men," Jones said, "they can pick it up. Mr. MacLeod is expecting someone. I read the part I told you about. That's why I brought Mr. Thompson down here. So you could hit him while he wasn't suspecting."

"My God," Schwartz muttered, echoing Flanagan.

"There's something else I would say," The Prophet told him, "knowing Jimmy as Scat and I do. I don't think he would knife the guy who hired him, not without letting him know. I think that after he gave the report to MacLeod, he let Thompson know what was in the wind, not just for Amacron, but for Mr. George Thompson. Remember, Thompson had commissioned the report. Commissioned it with no holds barred. But what Jimmy had discovered was not exactly what Thompson had expected. That was that Amacron's mother/father Thompson was what Amacron needed least at this point in time. Sure he

would cut, cut much of what Jimmy advised. Cut and re-organize, but always with his single judgement hovering over the full plan. Regarding the advice where it suited him, over-riding where there were personal reasons, old loyalties, just enough of these things not to save the company. MacLeod talked to me. He's a late comer, fast riser. Came in from the outside. From steel, not from nonferrous metals."

Jones grinned at them. "Quite an expert, aren't I? But what MacLeod was telling me, that made sense. Steel's been through the wringer copper is going through. And he had some answers, some Thompson didn't like."

"And you think," Scat Flanagan said thoughtfully, "that Jimmy had come up with the fact that it was Thompson who would have to go?"

The Prophet nodded. "I'm sure he did. Thompson had hired him for the company. But Jimmy just couldn't deliver that report without letting the old man prepare himself. Neither could he deliver what was presumed to be a single copy to Thompson the night before it was due at the office.

"It might disappear without ever being revealed. It would be different, you see, with others seeing Jimmy and the report

arrive on Tuesday morning. From what Mr. MacLeod told me, there was over thirty grand involved in that fancy binder. Thirty grand of Amacron's money."

"Phone call?" Schwartz asked.

"Called him or saw him. Didn't give him the report."

"And you're suggesting Thompson went to the Beverly Plaza and sabotaged Thompson's rental car?" Schwartz was unbelieving.

Jeremiah Hones said gently, "He told Scat, here, that he could. When Scat told me, I wondered why Thompson had bragged that."

"I'll be damned," Schwartz exploded.

"He's waiting in your office," Jones reminded him. "I've been doing quite a lot of

talking, Lieutenant. Now, may be you should."

They did not wait at police headquarters. They went down to find a cab.

Scat Flanagan said finally, "You sure you're not crazy, Prophet."

"George Thompson," Jeremiah Jones said softly, "is a jealous God, more even than the father and mother of Amacron."

They went out into the night together, a self-propelled giant in a wheel chair and another old warrior walking beside him. Vengeance was upstairs in the hands of the law, or even the Lord.

Neither was easy in his mind.

For the oldest man of them all had killed for love.

"Amacron," The Prophet said, "was one hell of a child."

Next Month's Headliners:

MURDER AT DONDO BEACH by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

THE KILLING OF JOE THE BOSS by DAVID MAZROFF

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

THE LENTON CROFT ROBBERS by ARTHUR MORRISON

a MARTIN HEWITT classic

SNAKE MAN

A brandy bottle...a deadly killer snake...and Murder directing the play. What chance could he have?

by JAMES H. SCHMITZ

EARLY AFTERNOON sunlight, filtered by curtains, flooded through two large windows on the south side of the living room of the late



Arnold MacAdam. The room's furnishings were in considerable disorder. A big mahogany armchair and a narrow table had been overturned, and a decanter, which evidently had been standing on the table and still held perhaps a pint of amber liquid, had rolled between them. Stains on the pale-gray wall-to-wall carpeting showed where much of the decanter's contents had spilled and dried.

Halfway across the room from the unlit fireplace a poker with a smeared tip was lying on the floor. Eight feet away lay something else, twisted and colorful, which was not entirely motionless. The room smelled unpleasantly.

The thing that wasn't entirely motionless was a great, thick-bodied rattlesnake. Its head had been crushed into barely identifiable flatness, and there were slashes across its back, where pale reptilian flesh showed through the bold patterns of scales. But the tail still shifted slowly, back and forth, along the carpet.

There was a rap on the door leading to the hall. One of the two men standing in the room called out, "Come on in!" He was gray-haired, heavily and strongly built.

The man who entered the room was blond, in his

mid-twenties, with a boyishly handsome face. He glanced at the dead snake with an expression of revulsion, gave the gray-haired man a polite smile.

"I was told you wanted to speak to me, Dr. Woodmere," he said. He shook his head. "That was a terrible thing to happen to Mr. MacAdam!"

Dr. Woodmere said, "Yes, it was, Gene." He indicated the man standing a few feet from him. "It's this gentleman who wants to talk to you. He's Lieutenant Nelson, of the city police. This is Gene Hunter, Lieutenant."

Hunter shifted his gaze questioningly to Nelson. "Yes, sir?"

"I'd like a firsthand account of what you reported to Sergeant Loeser this morning," Nelson told him. He was spare-bodied, sandy-haired, a few inches taller than Hunter. "How long have you been working for Mr. MacAdam?"

"A little more than half a year."

"Before that?"

"I came here from Philadelphia. I worked in a service station and did a few months of bell hopping there." Hunter added, "I was on parole."

Nelson nodded. "Yes, we checked. Grand theft, automobile. Second offense. You

served one year. Your parole period ended eight months ago."

"Yes, sir. I'd saved up some money and decided to come out to the coast. This was the first job I got here. Mr. MacAdam knew I had a record, by the way."

Dr. Woodmere blinked watery blue eyes.

"So did I," he observed mildly. "Arnold mentioned it one evening."

Lieutenant Nelson said, "Just what were your duties here?"

"Well, I was really hired as a chauffeur. But Mr. MacAdam didn't go out much at all. I did all the shopping. I did repair work around the house and kept the car in shape. I'm a pretty good mechanic."

"Sort of general handy man?"

"Yes, sir, that was about it. And then I had to see to it that nobody bothered Mr. MacAdam. He hated to be disturbed, and when I wasn't busy with something else, I'd be in the gate house. The gate has an electric lock, and nobody got through unless Mr. MacAdam had told me he wanted to see them. Except, of course, Dr. Woodmere."

Dr. Woodmere said, "I probably was the nearest thing to a friend Arnold MacAdam

had. I visited him frequently at his invitation and was of some assistance to him in his research. But we never became close, though I seem to have been exempted from his general distaste for the human race."

"Did he have other employees since you've been here?" Nelson asked Hunter.

"No," said Hunter.

Nelson remarked, "This is a sizable estate. Who took care of the gardening? The house-keeping? Who cooked for him?"

"An agency sends gardeners here every Monday morning," Hunter said. "Whenever Mr. MacAdam wanted them, they'd send a team to go over the house. They'd have everything done in an hour."

Dr. Woodmere added, "Arnold was both a gourmet and a talented chef. He did his own cooking."

Hunter nodded. "There'd be a delivery of fancy food-stuffs from the city airport three or four times a month. I think it was some club Mr. MacAdam belonged to. He didn't want a cook around."

"Did you help him look after his snake collection?" Lieutenant Nelson asked.

Hunter grimaced briefly. "No! I couldn't have done it. I can't stand snakes. Anyway, Mr. MacAdam wouldn't have

trusted anyone else to do it right."

"Quite true," Dr. Woodmere agreed. "He was finicky about the snakes and took meticulous care of them. He never obtained a degree, but in his specialized field, snakes and snake venoms, he was a leading research scientist. He had connections with several scientific institutions."

"So I learned today," said Nelson. "Snakes, and gourmet cooking, eh?" He reflected. "Did he have other interests?"

"Well, he liked chess, of course," Hunter said. "That's really how I got the job. Mr. MacAdam said if I couldn't give him a good enough game to make it reasonably interesting, he'd have no use for me here."

"It seems you were good enough at it," Nelson said.

"Good enough to satisfy him anyway. I've played chess every chance I've had, and I learned a lot more about it from Mr. MacAdam. He always won when he was sober. But after he'd been drinking a while, he'd take chances, and then I was as likely to win as not."

"He was a heavy drinker?"

Hunter hesitated. Dr. Woodmere said, "Arnold was an alcoholic. A brandy man. He never touched liquor during the day, but he'd start after dinner and go on steadily until he was

ready to retire. He didn't always drink heavily, but I've seen him quite thoroughly drunk on a number of occasions."

"Did he make a practice of playing around with poisonous snakes when he'd been drinking?" Nelson said.

Dr. Woodmere frowned. "It wasn't a regular thing. But when he got the notion, he'd bring one of his favorites in from the pens and release it here in the room." He added, "He was so skilled in handling them, and so familiar with the attack habits of the various species, that one had the impression he really was in no danger even when the brandy was slowing his reactions."

"Well," Lieutenant Nelson said after a moment, "let's see what we can establish about what went on last night." He looked at Hunter. "You told Loeser you were in the house in the early part of the evening."

Hunter nodded. "Yes, sir. Around eight o'clock. Mr. MacAdam got me on the gate house phone and told me to come over for a couple of chess games."

"He'd been drinking when you got here?"

Hunter shrugged. "He'd got started. It's like Dr. Woodmere said. He'd start, and keep on going."

"What happened after you arrived?"

"We began a game. But Mr. MacAdam didn't really have his attention on it. He was worried about that snake there."

The eyes of all three shifted for a moment to the battered snake body.

"Worried about it?" Nelson asked.

"That was the Monster," said Dr. Woodmere. "Arnold's current special pet. An Eastern diamondback and, as you can see, a giant even for that species. Arnold was proud of the fact that it was still thriving after a year in captivity. Captured rattlesnakes ignore food as a rule and simply starve to death."

"I see," Nelson said.

"In a way, that was the trouble last night," remarked Hunter. "Mr. MacAdam said the Monster hadn't eaten for the past month, but it had shed its skin during the day and might be ready to feed now."

"He was going to feed it here in the living room?"

"That's what he said. He'd bring it here, get it awake and excited, and then try it out on a young rabbit."

Nelson looked at him. "You didn't want to stay to watch?"

Hunter shook his head emphatically.

"I sure didn't! The Monster

gave me the chills more than anything else Mr. MacAdam had in the pens. He showed me a snake swallowing a white rat when I first got here. I almost threw up. I told him that seeing he wasn't interested in chess, I'd get back to the gate house if he didn't mind. He laughed. He knew how I felt about the Monster. So while he went off to get it, I put away the chess set and left."

"What time was it then?"

"Well, sir, Sergeant Loeser asked me that, too, and I can't say exactly. But I figure I hadn't been at the house much more than half an hour, so it probably was a little after eight-thirty. I'm sure it was before nine o'clock."

"What was Mr. MacAdam's condition at the time?"

Hunter hesitated. "Well, you could tell he was getting drunk. Not staggering around or anything like that. He was talking pretty loud and his face was red. It didn't occur to me that he could have trouble with the snake. I've seen him handle them when he was in a lot worse shape than that."

Lieutenant Nelson turned to the fireplace and took two objects from the mantel shelf. One was T-shaped, a narrow plastic crosspiece about a foot in length set on a somewhat longer handle. The other was a

tube with a leather noose dangling from one end.

"These were lying on the floor this morning," he said. "They're what Mr. MacAdam used to control a snake?"

The others nodded.

"Yes," said Dr. Woodmère. "The noose is slipped over a snake's head and tightened about the neck. As you see, the strap extends down through the tube and can be secured at the grip's end. It's a standard-method of moving them around. They're released by relaxing the noose." He took the T-shaped device in one hand. "Arnold used this to prevent a threatening snake from striking, or to deflect its thrust. The rod guides the neck to the side and the strike goes wide."

"All right," Nelson said. He laid the utensils back on the mantel. "The appearance of it is then that he was playing his rather dangerous game with this snake last night after Hunter left the house. And that at some point there came a strike he failed to deflect. In what hand would he hold that plastic stick, Hunter?"

Hunter shook his head. "I'm not sure. I didn't really see him use it too often."

"He held it in the left hand, always," said Dr. Woodmère.

Nelson nodded. "That fits the picture. When he misses

with the stick, the snake stabs its fangs into his left forearm. MacAdam reacts drunkenly by taking up the poker from the fireplace and beating the creature to death before his strength gives out."

He turned to Hunter. "You reported hearing a disturbance shortly before ten o'clock."

"Around a quarter to ten," Hunter said. "The dogs began to bark, and I went out to see what was bothering them. They quieted down when I called to them, and I went back into the gate house. I'm rather sure of the time because I'd planned to go to bed at ten, and I did. That was only a few minutes later."

"Did the barking come from the direction of the house?"

"It seemed to," Hunter said. "Frankly, I thought they'd smelled a cat and were going after it."

"You found the main door to the house unlocked next morning?"

"Yes. I don't believe Mr. MacAdam ever locked it."

Nelson said, "Then a prowler could have got into the house last night?"

"A prowler?" Hunter looked startled, then shook his head. "No, sir, that's impossible! King and Wolf are big German shepherds, and they mean business. They're trained watchdogs. A prowler couldn't get

near the house. I have to keep them locked up on the mornings the gardeners are here, or they'd go for the gardeners."

"I'll confirm that," Dr. Woodmere remarked. "Arnold's dogs are no trouble to me because they've known me since they were pups. But it took him a while to condition them to accept Gene when he went to work here."

"That's right," Hunter agreed. "It was at least a couple of weeks before I felt really comfortable alone with them. After that, they'd obey me as well as they obeyed Mr. MacAdam."

Nelson said, "At eight o'clock this morning, then, you tried to arouse Mr. MacAdam by telephone?"

Hunter nodded. "Those were my standard instructions. Mr. MacAdam was a heavy sleeper, and he wanted to be awakened at eight o'clock sharp. The telephone's in his bedroom. Every morning, I'd keep ringing until he got out of bed and told me to hang up. This morning—well, I couldn't say how long I kept on ringing, but it must have been several minutes. Then I decided I'd better go over to the house and make sure he was all right."

"Did you suspect what had happened?"



"No, I wasn't thinking of the snake at all then. But I thought Mr. MacAdam might have fallen on the stairs and injured himself, something like that."

"You found things in the living room as Sergeant Loeser later saw them?"

"Yes, sir. I wasn't sure even then it was the Monster that had killed Mr. MacAdam. He was lying on his left arm and I didn't see any bite marks. His face was purple—I thought he might have had a stroke. When I couldn't find a throat pulse, I called for an ambulance. I didn't touch anything in the room but Mr. MacAdam."

Lieutenant Nelson looked about the room a moment,

scratching his jaw. "There's nothing else you can tell us?"

"No, sir. That's all I know."

Nelson sighed. "Well," he said, "the picture seems simple and complete. But let's complicate it a little now. We don't want to overlook any possibilities, even if they seem farfetched. Let's assume something else happened than what's implied by the setup in this room. That is, assuming that somebody wanted to make it appear that Mr. MacAdam had been killed while playing a foolhardy game with a dangerous snake. Somebody who was in fact in the house at the time MacAdam died last night."

Hunter began, "But—" He checked himself and shook his head.

Nelson looked at him. "What were you going to say?"

"That the dogs wouldn't have let anyone into the house." Hunter smiled weakly. "But they would have let me in, of course."

"They also would have let me in," said Dr. Woodmere, looking interested. "And I daresay I'm still agile enough to get on the estate without using the gate and letting Hunter know I was here."

"So that's two of you so far," said Nelson. "Has anyone else had an opportunity to get friendly with the dogs?"

"No," Hunter said reluctantly. "They'd attack any stranger who tried to make up to them or offer them food; that's part of their training. And they won't touch meat they find lying on the ground. You couldn't dope them."

"What about former employees?"

"There are none the dogs would know," said Dr. Woodmere. "Gene's predecessor as Arnold's factotum was run down by a car in the city three days before Gene was hired. He died a week later."

Nelson nodded. "I see. Well, the person we're speculating about would have to be quite familiar with Mr. MacAdam's habits and know that somebody else could testify to those habits. Given those conditions, let's try to determine how he could have gone about murdering MacAdam and staging the scene revealed here in the morning."

"MacAdam had been drinking heavily before he died. There was a swelling on the back of his head. He'd taken a blow heavy enough to have brought on a rather serious concussion. He might have got it by falling and striking his head against some hard, solid object, perhaps that big wooden armchair which he could have knocked over in going down."

On the other hand, somebody might have sapped him, leaving him at least temporarily unconscious. That person then could have made doubly sure that MacAdam could do nothing to interfere with his impending murder by fastening him into the chair. There were marks on his right wrist that could be rope burns.

"We'll say for the moment that, in fact, that's what happened. So the murderer has now secured his victim. At this point, the big rattlesnake is still in its enclosure in the greenhouse structure attached to the house where the snakes are kept. The murderer goes there, armed with the noose tube on the mantel."

Gene Hunter smiled shakily. "That should let me out then! I couldn't have forced myself to go near that snake."

"Perhaps not," Nelson said. "But to go on with our speculation. The murderer also has some kind of club, perhaps the one with which he knocked out MacAdam. He works the noose over the Monster's neck, pins the creature's head down and stuns it with a blow of the club. He carries the snake back to the living room.

"He might have tried to force its fangs into MacAdam's arm, discharging the venom in the process. But it would be an

awkward job to work them in a manner that would convincingly simulate a stabbing strike, and—particularly with a snake as large and powerful as the Monster—a dangerous job for the murderer if the creature began to revive before he was done. So he doesn't try that approach. He wants something safe. He pins the rattlesnake down on the carpet, smashes in its skull with the poker before releasing it, then continues to slash at it until he's sure it's completely out of action if not dead. And now let's go to MacAdam's laboratory and see if we can identify the materials our murderer needed to complete his plan."

In the laboratory, Nelson stopped before a long wall shelf on which perhaps a hundred snake skulls were arranged in order, each with an identifying card attached.

"Here are the Eastern diamondbacks," he said. "Two of these skulls must be almost as large as that of the Monster. Could there have been a third one, perhaps a little larger?"

Hunter shook his head. "I wouldn't know that," he said. "I wasn't in here very often."

Dr. Woodmere said thoughtfully, "As I recall it, Arnold did have three diamondback skulls of that general size. I can't be positive, however."

Nelson nodded. "Our theory assumes there was a third such skull here. The murderer took it, positioned the fangs against MacAdam's arm, brought the flat of his hand down on top of the skull. The fangs drove deep into the flesh, slicing through blood vessels. He drew them back out, having now produced authentic diamondback fang punctures, spaced very much as they would have been spaced if the Monster had delivered the strike. And the Monster's skull, of course, had been too thoroughly mashed to permit a check on the exact spacing of its fangs, if it should occur to someone to want to check on that."

Lieutenant Nelson turned away from the shelf and went toward a cabinet on the far side of the laboratory, trailed by Dr. Woodmere and Hunter.

"There remained," he said, "the matter of introducing enough venom into MacAdam's body to kill him. I was looking around the laboratory a while ago and found what our murderer required." He pulled open a drawer. "Hypodermic needles. . . I think we can assume that one of them is also missing now. And"—he opened the door of the cabinet—"snake venom."

The three looked for a moment at a cluster of small

brown bottles on one of the cabinet shelves. A label showing a series of typewritten numerals was pasted to each of them.

Nelson said, "There was a note on the desk of MacAdam's study indicating these were to be packaged for shipment to the state university today. Fresh venom. Well, that completes the murder picture. The murderer fills a hypodermic with venom obtained from one of these bottles, injects it deeply into the puncture marks in MacAdam's arm. He waits for MacAdam to die, releases him from the chair, arranges the room as he intends it to look in the morning, then leaves the house to dispose of the snake skull, the needle and the venom container. A careful man throughout, he left no telltale prints on any of the articles he handled in carrying out the murder. Well, gentleman, what do you think of the theory now?"

Dr. Woodmere shook his head, said after a moment, "I can find no fault with it."

Gene Hunter said, "But why should anyone want to kill Mr. MacAdam? If you're thinking of me, I had a dream job here! It was easy work. He was paying me plenty. And now he's dead, I've lost the job."

"Ah, yes, the motive, of course," said Nelson, nodding.

"Well, this morning, close to twenty-five thousand dollars worth of negotiable securities were found in a section of MacAdam's study desk. The section wasn't even locked! It seems he took chances in more ways than one."

Hunter stared at him. "But if the securities were still there—"

Nelson shrugged. "Take a little, leave a little, eh? Supposing that last night it was forty or fifty thousand dollars worth of securities, instead of twenty-five? Our murderer wanted to avoid doing anything that might indicate a crime had been committed. MacAdam's records of his financial transactions were rather indifferently kept, but we should be able to establish eventually what he actually had in the desk, and why it was there at this time."

"You know, Gene, it does rather point to you," Dr. Woodmere remarked judicially. "You have no alibi for last night, while I have a nifty one. At eleven o'clock I was returning by jet from a convention in the company of four respectable medical practitioners and approaching the city airport. Arnold had been dead at least an hour by then."

Hunter said shakily, "Why should anything? Lieutenant Nelson said point to anybody? It's only a theory. It didn't have

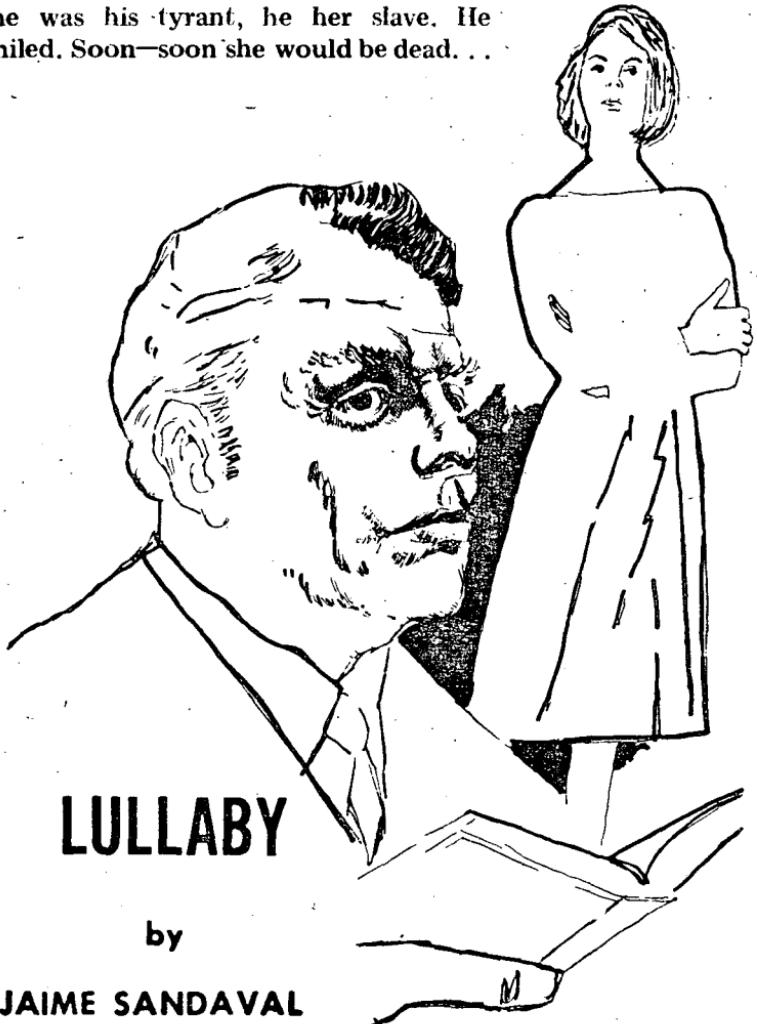
to happen that way. Did it? Mr. MacAdam got drunk and was careless, and the Monster finally got to him. That's all that *really* happened!"

The other two men were silent a moment, looking at him. Then Nelson said, "We could say that MacAdam was too drunk to apply the measures that should have saved him, or even to try to get help, after he was struck by a snake. He could have panicked. If he'd absorbed most of the diamond-back's supply of venom, it would have taken him perhaps an hour to die then, with the poison gradually breaking down his blood cells and turning his tissues into a kind of pudding. But you see, that isn't what occurred. The autopsy shows that MacAdam died of asphyxiation, possibly in a matter of minutes."

Dr. Woodmere nodded. "The result of a heavy injection of a neurotoxin. A man can't breathe when his lungs are paralyzed. A rattlesnake's bite won't produce that effect."

Nelson concluded: "Hunter, you did your homework rather well but still not well enough. You should have checked a little further. That particular bottle you took from MacAdam's laboratory cabinet contained freshly milked cobra venom."

She was his tyrant, he her slave. He
smiled. Soon—soon she would be dead...



ULLABY

by

JAIME SANDAVAL

ARTHUR SOAMES turned wearily from the sidewalk on to the flagstoned path leading to his home in the quiet residential neighborhood.

It had been a long, hot day at the office, and his jacket, neatly folded, rode his arm. He was looking forward to a cooling Collins. Grace had insisted upon

having the car, as she usually did, and he had had to take the bus both ways. It shamed him that he was the only breadwinner on the street who didn't drive regularly to and from work.

They could easily afford another car, of course, but Grace was adamant about it.

"We'll live on your salary, Arthur," she insisted. "It's the proper thing to do."

Arthur was bitter that his salary was barely enough for the upkeep of the big house he despised, denying him the small luxuries he would have enjoyed. Grace never stinted herself from her own money, he noted ruefully.

His heart sank when he heard loud voices issuing from the house. A burly informed figure slammed open the screen door and descended the three steps to the flagstones. Grace's high-pitched voice pursued the fleeing man. "—want you to do something about it, Ray Marks!" she shrilled. "And no more excuses!"

Chief of Police Ray Marks, Grace Soames' younger brother, stopped in mid-flight. He tuned and leveled a finger at the screen door.

"The next time you call me over here on the pretext you have information about the strangler, Grace," he began in a voice that trembled with rage,

"and then complain to me about the kids in the neighborhood bothering you—"

He didn't finish it. Instead, he whirled, red-faced, to confront Arthur Soames. His tall, broad-shouldered figure dwarfed his brother-in-law's short, dumpy frame. "Why don't you tie that wife of yours over the end of the bed and do what you should do?" he demanded savagely before stalking across the street to the parked police cruiser.

Arthur blinked at the vehemence of the angry words as well as at the image they conjured up. The impossible image. Grace tied over the end of the bed? He sighed, then entered the house apprehensively. His wife, tall and overpoweringly large, confronted him at once.

"If you were any kind of a man at all, Arthur Soames, I wouldn't have to call my brother to protect me!" she said, conveniently ignoring that her brother had shown little inclination to protect her.

"The neighborhood children are little demons," the complaining voice whined. "They make noise all day long so I can't take a nap. They race around the house and trample my roses and begonias, and one of them actually rode his bicycle into me on the sidewalk this afternoon. Deliberately. What are you going to do about it, Arthur?"

He walked silently to the spacious living room and made himself a tall drink from the portable bar. He settled himself in his leather armchair with the evening newspaper and hoped that Grace had run down. *I should have known better*, he thought, when she pursued him. "What are you going to do about it, Arthur?" she persisted.

The whining voice grated on his nerves. "I'll get my hunting rifle and ambush them at the candy store," he said tiredly.

"A comedian you're not, Arthur!" Grace snapped. He breathed a sigh of relief when she flounced from the room. The newspaper rattled in his trembling hands. He was scanning words that didn't register upon his consciousness, such was his inner turmoil. How long could he put up with the non-stop nagging which was his lot at home?

Grace was the principal owner of the factory where Arthur worked. Her brother, Ray Marks, was a minor stockholder in the family business in which sister and brother were the only remaining principals. One of the few times Arthur had felt a flash of sympathy for his overbearing brother-in-law had come when he witnessed Ray's inchoate rage when Grace coolly informed him that she had decided that last year's profits should be plowed back into the business.

Not that it was easy to feel sympathy for Ray Marks, Arthur reflected. Ray was a live-it-up type, which was what infuriated him when Grace purposely denied him the cash he had been counting upon.

The family name had gotten him the job as police chief. Arthur had heard a behind-the-hand tale or two concerning Ray which left no doubt that the uniform and the position protected Ray from certain accusations, especially from women.

The sound of Grace's piercing voice was still in Arthur's ears, even though she had left the room. Her constant complaints were grinding him down, and her sneering put-downs of his performance at the office and at home was eroding what little self-confidence he had once possessed.

He had considered divorce, but dismissed the idea. One reason he had put up with Grace as long as he had was that he had married her with his eyes open. He hadn't known how really obnoxious she could be, of course. He had expected to live comfortably in the home Grace had inherited.

But Grace would have none of it. She insisted that he go to work in the family business, in a demeaning position he despised. Right from the start she had the whip hand and employed it. If

only Grace would die, Arthur thought, for the hundredth time! But she would obviously outlive the ulcers she was creating in her husband.

He found himself reading the first paragraph of the newspaper's lead article for the third time. It concerned the local strangler who had killed five women, terrorizing the feminine populace. Police Chief Ray Marks was under pressure because of his failure to find the murderer, who had a disconcerting habit of calling the police after each crime and laughing hideously.

Why couldn't the strangler kill Grace? Arthur read the article in its entirety, absorbing the details. The strangler's victims had all been thirtyish housewives whose confidence he had somehow gained, since there were never signs of forced entry.

The murder weapon was always the same, a thin nylon cord. The murderer left no clues, vanishing swiftly after his ghoulish phone calls. A flicker of interest caused Arthur to re-read the item, carefully. Grace certainly fitted the pattern: she was alone all day, she was the right age, and—he looked up from the paper—she was in the way.

It was ridiculous, of course, but—

Arthur set the paper down and stared silently across the

room. Was it possible? His mind skipped from point to point. Grace would certainly be a perfect victim for the strangler. When Arthur was away next week, for example, on his yearly fishing trip, about which Grace always complained unmercifully but which was the one point on which Arthur had never given in, Grace would be alone.

Grace had gone only once to Arthur's fishing camp. She had complained of the wet weather, of the mosquitoes at the lake, of the cabin's lack of facilities. She had never accompanied him again.

Suppose—

Suppose while Arthur was fishing at the lake, with a perfect alibi, the strangler visited Grace?

Was it possible?

During the next few days, he found himself making preparations. The night he removed a thin nylon cord from his tackle box in the garage he knew he was committed. He felt no compunction over what he proposed to do, only the need for caution. No, he felt no compunction, and he knew he would feel no remorse.

He told Grace he was leaving for the lake on Friday evening, and she immediately became sullen. Tirades alternated with fits of silence. He was grateful for the latter. Friday night, when he was ready to leave she was

stretched out on the chaise lounge in the living room, stuffing her fat face with chocolates while she watched television, attired in a dirty-looking, crumpled negligee. It was a picture that strengthened his resolution.

He collected his rods and tackle box and drove to the lake. The cabin was situated in a wooded area on the south side, remote from prying eyes. Ray Marks had surprised Arthur once by asking for the key to the cabin.

"Got a little weekendin' to do," he'd said with a man-to-man wink. Arthur had refused, pointing out sensibly that Grace would never forgive either of them if she found out.

Ray had been angry at the refusal, but a month later he had surprised Arthur again, this time with an offer to buy the cabin. Arthur had again refused, and Ray departed in a snit similar to his sister's in moments of frustration.

Arthur stopped first on the north side of the lake where a small country store was located. He went in and waited patiently while old Mr. Miller, the proprietor, waited on another customer.

"Ahhhh, there, Mr. Soames," the old man greeted Arthur finally. "Back for another go at the bass?"



"If you have any effective lures," Arthur smiled. "The ones you sold me last time didn't work so well."

"Well, you want to give 'em a chance, don't you?" Mr. Miller twinkled.

"Not really," Arthur said. He examined the box of lures Mr. Miller placed on the counter top.

"Would you make me up a box of groceries, please? You know what I'll need. I'll be here for a week."

He selected three lures when his groceries were ready, then went out to his car. His alibi was beginning to be established now. Mr. Miller would swear that Arthur had indeed been at the cabin on Friday night.

Arthur parked his car facing away from the cabin. He didn't want anyone across the lake to see his lights flash on when he was ready to drive back to town.

He ate more of the smoked ham Mr. Miller had supplied than he really wanted, to establish a hearty, fishing-provoked appetite. He still had an hour of

daylight left, and on impulse he unlimbered his favorite rod and walked down to the lake.

He fished with practiced skill, enjoying the quiet and the solitude. Wouldn't it be something to be able to do this when he pleased? And to travel as he pleased, after he inherited from Grace? The thought warmed him. He caught two bass large enough for the pan and threw back several under the size limit. When the mosquitoes became pesty with advancing twilight, he went back to the cabin.

His plan for the evening was simplicity itself. He would drive back to the city, park several blocks away from the house, and walk to it under cover of darkness. He would enter the back door, go upstairs to the bedroom, and strangle Grace with the thin nylon cord. Before returning to the lake for a day's fishing while waiting to be notified by the police of Grace's death, he would stop at a pay phone and make the required phone call with the hideous laugh.

He spent a little time giving the cabin a more lived-in look. He smoked several cigarettes in rapid succession and butted them out in the ashtray. He cooked one of the bass and left the greasy frying pan on the two-burner stove while he took the cooked fish out behind the

cabin and disposed of it. He left the light on in the cabin when he was ready to leave.

He drove back to town rapidly. Approaching his own neighborhood, he used side streets and back alleys. When he left the car in tree-shadowed darkness, he cut through back yards to reach the rear of his house. The nylon cord was coiled in his pocket. He unlocked the back door and entered. The stillness sent a shiver through him, but he shook it off.

He took the cord from his pocket, wound it around his hands, and jerked it tight several times. He had seen it done on television once. He crept up the stairs without giving himself time to think further, careful to walk on the sides of the stair treads to prevent them from creaking under his weight.

He tip-toed to their bedroom door. A rasping snore reassured him. All was as it should be. Almost boldly he opened the door and approached the bed. Grace was a heavy sleeper. The summer night's heat and consequent lack of bedcovers left her throat exposed.

He thrust his hand between the pillow and her neck to circle her neck with the cord. He pulled it tight and knotted it. Grace's big body heaved convulsively, and for one horrifying instant Arthur thought she might

fight him off. But the cord was already cutting deeply into the fat around her neck, and her lips swelled as her face turned blue. She sagged back limply upon the bed.

Arthur remained at bedside for five minutes after there was no further movement. As he had expected, he felt no remorse, only relief. Everything had gone as planned. He descended the stairs, ready to leave and go back to his car.

He froze when the front door opened with a bang and lights came on. His throat parched and his legs refused to move as heavy footsteps approached the kitchen. He heard the click of the light switch and then the kitchen overhead light flashed on, bathing the room in unwelcome brightness that caused him to flinch.

Police Chief Ray Marks stared in surprise at his brother-in-law. "Thought you were at the lake," he grunted. Then he scowled. "Did Grace get me over here on another wild goose chase? Made me promise I'd check out the house an' make sure the strangler wasn't in the neighborhood, but if she knew you were goin' to be here why—"

He paused, studying Arthur. "Say, what's the matter with you? Your face looks like wet aspirin."

Arthur opened his mouth, but



words emerged with difficulty. "Grace—" he got out finally. "Grace—" He pointed to the stairs.

"Yeah?" Ray Marks said alertly. "Somethin' happened? C'mon, let's take a look."

The police chief's strong hand on his arm steered a rubber-legged Arthur upstairs and to the bedroom. Ray Marks whistled when he turned the bedroom light on. "Now that's a fine thing for a citizen to find when he comes back to his house to pick up somethin' he forgot," Arthur's brother-in-law said briskly.

Arthur found that he could breathe again.

Was it possible that Ray Marks was going to furnish him with the best alibi of all? He sought for words to express his supposed grief, then decided shocked silence was more impressive.

The silence after the police chief's first remark built up to a count of ten.

Ray Marks looked speculatively at Arthur Soames, but Arthur was positive that Ray hadn't the faintest notion that Arthur was

the architect for what had happened to Grace.

He was trying to conceal a nervous smile at the thought when Ray Mark's huge fist came up and smashed Arthur solidly upon the chin, and darkness descended upon him like an enveloping mantle.

Grace and Arthur Soames were buried side by side in a quiet double service. The newspapers speculated upon the out-of-pattern double-garroting of husband and wife, but it was nine days' wonder, quickly forgotten.

Police Chief Ray Marks sold the family business within three months and invested the proceeds in gilt-edged, interest-bearing bonds.

Six months later he resigned as chief.

He took over Arthur Soames' fishing cabin for which there was no claimant and refurbished it, and in the quiet, peaceful days that ensued he thought of his sister and brother-in-law less and less frequently.

The bass fishing was spectacularly good.



COMING SOON: A NEW STORY BY CLAYTON MATTHEWS

SEEN CLOSE

by HERBERT HARRIS



No one knew who had lured stubborn old Jason to his somewhat over-due date with Murder. No one but the killer—and a blue flower. . . .

WHEN Superintendent Nate Sharp summoned me to discuss my report on the Malyon case, I knew he was going to demolish it with a few, well-frozen words.

The super had been hospitalized for an operation and Inspector Low had said to me

from the corner of his mouth: "Don't know what they took out of the Old Man. Certainly wasn't his spleen."

Sharp looked at me from under his sagebrush eyebrows. He always made me feel like the wag who appears before the Dean after hooking a china

receptacle on the college weathervane.

"What's this picture?" he asked, picking up a photo and thrusting out a jaw which had never taken "No" for an answer.

"That's the one the nephew took of his uncle in the grounds of Oak Lodge," I said. "It's part of the nephew's alibi. You'll see that the clock over the stable says five-past-ten. It proves he was with his uncle in the morning, and not in the afternoon when the old boy was strangled."

"Proves?" Sharp's lip curled. "The clock could have stopped the night before. Or the nephew could have put the clock back, then on again. It's been done."

"Yes," I said, "but the clock seemed okay, and there's the evidence of Mrs. Lake, the servant. She saw the nephew take that picture, and a little later say goodbye to his uncle and go off in his car at about half-past-ten."

"He could have come back in the afternoon, I take it?" snapped the super. "After all, Mrs. Lake left at mid-day. The uncle was all alone in the afternoon, wasn't he?"

"Oh, you've read my report then?" I hazarded the gentlest of smiles.

"Yes, and I think you assume too much," the super

said. He picked up the report and pretended to read it again.

"Jason Malyon died somewhere around three to three-thirty in the afternoon," Sharp droned on. "Death by strangulation. The safe in the house had been rifled." He paused. "So you assume he was killed by a burglar. 'Probably surprised and engaged burglar.' I quote you. Awful lot of 'probably' in this report."

"Of course," I said, clearing my throat; "we didn't rule out the nephew Charles. He had a motive insofar that he was in debt and was due to inherit eight thousand under the old man's will."

"So?"—the super made it sound like three syllables.

"Well, he did visit his uncle in the morning," I explained. "Mrs. Lake saw him take the picture and saw him leave. I've said in the report what we wanted the picture for. Charles supplies pictures of the landed gentry to one of these glossy monthlies."

"So he was there in the morning," the super said. "But, why couldn't he have been there in the afternoon as well, when Mrs. Lake had gone and the old man was alone? He could have told his uncle the first picture was no good, and that he'd come back to take another."

"Quite," I agreed, "but when Jacob Malyon died, his nephew was fifty miles away. After leaving his uncle he drove to Brighton and booked in at a hotel there. It's in the report."

"Never mind, go on," the super said.

"He met a girl friend and had too much to drink. He retired to his hotel room with a sick headache at noon, and told his chambermaid he wasn't to be disturbed until he rang for some tea. She took him some tea just after five. The girl said he had gone to bed after swallowing some aspirins, so he was in the hotel all afternoon apparently."

"Apparently?" Sharp shot at me.

"Well, his car never left the parking lot," I shot back, "and, he never went out without the car."

The super leaned back, folded his hands across his chest and shut his eyes. There was a long silence.

"Suppose," the super said presently, "I am Charles Malyon. I photographed my uncle early in the morning. I think: 'Here's a good alibi. Mrs. Lake has seen me take the picture. The stable clock says ten-five. It should help to prove that I was at the house in the morning—not the afternoon. But I realize that my picture is a dud. For

some reason or other, it isn't going to come out. Well?"

I didn't say anything. I knew how the super loved to flirt with imaginative theories.

"Well, I go to Brighton. I retire with migraine to my hotel room. I let the chambermaid know all about it. But when she's turned her back, I get up, disguise myself, and walk out of the hotel looking very unlike Charles Malyon. I leave my car behind, as an added touch, and I take a train.

"I go to my uncle's house. Before seeing him, I put the stable clock back to ten. I tell Uncle Jacob I want to do a repeat of the photo I took in the morning. Okay so far?"

"Ingenious," I said. "You should write crime stories, sir." I wished I hadn't said that, because the super didn't look a bit flattered.

"You should read them," he said. "But to continue. I kill my uncle, rifle the safe to make it look like burglary and put the stable clock right again. You're still with me?"

"Yes," I told him with a rush. "Back to Brighton by train. Re-enter the hotel in disguise. Remove disguise. Climb into bed. The chambermaid finds you there when she brings your tea in just after five." I allowed myself another diffident smile.

"You think it's not possible?" the super said, leaning hard on his desk.

"Nothing is impossible, sir," I answered. "It's just that... well, it's a bit shattering the way you think up these things almost on the spur of the moment."

"I never think up things on the spur of the moment," the super said. "I've been constructing a possible sequence of events ever since I looked at this picture three hours ago. Here, look at it again. Not that it will do you any good."

I pretended to study the photo, intently though I already knew it like my own wedding group. "Of course," I said, glancing up at the super with a look that was meant to be intelligent. "If there had been a few shadows, we could have fixed the position of the sun, or measured the shadows, and perhaps worked out the time..."

I looked at him hopefully. He was just watching me.

"You're improving," he said. "But I was thinking of something else. For instance—the Ipomaea."

"The what?"

"That's the classical name. Commonly known as Morning Glory. You can see it growing fairly profusely against the stable wall."

"Is that what it is?" I studied the picture again.

"It's a flower that likes to go to bed early," Sharp explained. "It's fully open in the morning. Hence its name. In the afternoon it closes up."

"Ah," I nodded, and swallowed.

"We might see Charles Malyon again," the super said, "and ask him why the picture he took so early in the morning shows the Morning Glory folding its tent for the night. We might start working again from there, don't you think?"

"Yes," I said, and I didn't have to look at the super's face to know that I should never make a really great detective.



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